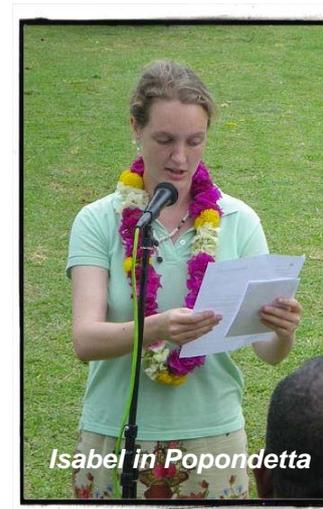


## Stranded in Popondetta

Popondetta, the capital of Papua New Guinea's Oro Province, is no stranger to natural disasters. The province was devastated by Cyclone Guba in 2007, causing flooding, destruction of gardens and property, and loss of life. The 28 bridges that were destroyed or damaged have since been rebuilt, however the standard of engineering must be questioned: on Wednesday the 21st of November I woke up in Popondetta to hear that three of the province's main bridges had been washed away overnight during a storm, one of which was the Girua Bridge which links both the airport and seaport to Popondetta by road. With the river at a high level, crossing by other means would be dangerous and construction of a 'wet crossing' to allow vehicles to pass would take time.



While I was impressed by the beauty of Oro Province, and by the work and people of the Anglican Church, the thought of being stuck in Popondetta for weeks on end and missing Christmas with my family did not appeal! The town was also rapidly running out of supplies, as nothing could be trucked in from the port.



Reports of the bridge saga spread rapidly through the area, with varying versions on what would happen next. My colleague Russ Thompson, ABM's project manager at St Margaret's Hospital, was increasingly frustrated, as the bridge construction meant the inevitable delay of work down at the health facility in Oro Bay. Container loads of medical equipment waiting to be trucked in and installed at the hospital would have to wait, as no trucks could hope to cross for weeks. Progress on constructing a wet

crossing was slow, as disputes from local landowners demanding compensation for the public use of their land arose.

My trip to Popondetta was my first as PNG Program Coordinator. I was there to observe how construction was progressing at St Margaret's Hospital in Oro Bay, and to represent ABM at the consecration of the new Bishop of Popondota Diocese, Lindsley Ihove. Thankfully, I was able to visit St Margaret's before the bridge was washed away, and the facility is looking amazing. I marvelled at the calm and cheerful Geoff, the nursing officer in charge at the current facility, who had about twenty mothers outside his small clinic holding babies of various ages. They sat patiently under the trees outside as they waited for his attention. Inside the current clinic is a delivery room with a dirt floor, and I felt encouraged to think that once St Margaret's opens, he will be able to perform his important work in a much cleaner and safer environment.

While the hospital itself is looking bright and modern, the staff housing situation remains poor, with Geoff's own house dilapidated and unsuitable for a head nurse. There remains a critical need for good quality houses to be built around the new hospital, so that it is able to attract and retain good staff, who in turn will be able to serve the people of Oro Province.

The consecration of Bishop Ihove was on the Popondetta side of the bridge, and I was thankfully able to attend this amazing event. Thousands of Anglican people showed up to witness the occasion, with singing groups from throughout the area dressed in their finest feathers, leaves, flowers, tapa cloths and performing traditional songs and dances. Bishop Lindsley was honoured with gifts and donations from all who came: one of the strangest sights for me was watching the new bishop walk across ten huge live pigs as part of a ritual.

On Monday, my Air Niugini flight back to Port Moresby was cancelled due to the bridge incident. However, Airlines PNG was still flying to Popondetta airport, and it did not rain on Monday afternoon as per usual. Thus, on Tuesday morning I awoke at 5am and boarded a bus for the river. Staring into the dark rushing water, I wondered if this was a bad idea. Others seems to be making it across ahead of me, so, along with some PNG colleagues, I rolled up my pants, put my bag on my head, and waded through the river which was now waist deep. Two local men quickly came to my aid and held my arms for support, and before I knew it I was on the other side, wet but happy to be on my way home. A few kina exchanged hands for their kind service, and I was on my way to Port Moresby and home.



I found out later that on the Monday, the Bishops of Port Moresby, New Guinea Islands and Dogura dioceses had made the crossing by riding on a bulldozer, with their luggage in the shovel at the front! If only someone had taken a photo.

Walking across pigs, bishops on bulldozers, breaking bridges: just another week in PNG, truly the land of the unexpected.

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**November 2011**