

July 28, 2014

Statement of events on July 24, 2014, Retirement, St Elizabeth

On the afternoon of Wednesday, July 23 at approximately 4 PM, I was contacted by Sean Finlason regarding a dead body that had been found in a cave in Retirement, St Elizabeth, and asked if I could assist in its removal. I informed him that I would contact my colleague, Jan Pael, to see if we could visit the site on Thursday, July 24. At approximately 6 PM, after having spoken to Mr Pael, I called Mr Finlason to tell him we would be there on July 24.

At approximately 1 PM, July 24, Mr Pael, Mr Finlason, and I met with the police officers involved with the case at the Maggoty police station. I learnt at that point that the body had been in the cave for over a week (I subsequently learnt from a family member of the deceased that he had gone missing 12 days earlier). Until then, I had been under the impression that it had only been 2-3 days.

We left the police station soon after, and proceeded to Retirement district where we met members of the fire department. They, along with several members of the local community, then carried our equipment to the cave. By approximately 2 PM, we had rigged a first rope and I descended into the cave to carry out reconnaissance.

The cave is a complex sinkhole with a boulder bridge about 5 metres down. Below the boulders is a series of interconnected fissures and narrow vertical chambers. Access through the boulders is limited to a fissure about 2m long and 70-100cm wide on the side of the shaft. The body is located directly below this point about 15m under the top edge of the entrance pit, and is in a small horizontal pocket about 1m across and 1m deep. The area to the sides of the body is very restricted.

The body was in a very decomposed and bloated condition. My immediate thought was that it would be impossible to extract it unless we were to sit on top of it and try to force a rope under, and around, the body. I had great doubts that we would be capable of doing this as it appeared to be quite heavy (80-90kg), and there was only enough room for one person at a time to perch on top of it. I also had great concerns that it would burst as we made the attempt. I must note that we were not equipped with any bio-hazard gear other than latex gloves.

Having completed my reconnaissance, I ascended the rope to report to the senior officer and confer with Mr Pael. The senior officer expressed his desire for us to try and remove the body, so Mr Pael and I descended into the cave together, and then had a body basket lowered in. Once we'd both reached the body, Mr Pael and I, after looking long and hard at the options, agreed that we could not extract it without exposing ourselves to great medical risk. We did not have bio-hazard suits, and no way to clean ourselves once we'd left the cave. We therefore abandoned the attempt and returned to the surface.

I must make clear that we could have probably removed the body if we had been informed much earlier, before it had become bloated. However, my understanding is that the police were not informed promptly of the disappearance. I must also make clear that the circumstances required

for a 73 year old man, who used a cane, to end up where he did are rather curious. The approach to the cave is down a steep hill, and then level until the funnel-shaped depression that surrounds the opening is reached. The perimeter of the entrance pit is about 30m, and the only spot where he could reach the deep point he occupied consists of about 2m of it. I must stress, though, that my field of expertise does not include crime scene investigation. It is limited to cave exploration, survey, and scientific research.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or require any further information.

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