

# Forgotten at the Heart of a War

Fighting Isolates, Terrifies Patients in Congo Hospital

By Emily Wax

BUNIA, Congo -- He is paralyzed from the waist down, and this place is the last place he wants to be. Sitting in a wheelchair, trapped in a forgotten hospital, Joseph Muhito gazes out over hilly jungle, terrified as he listens to the echoes of machine-gun fire in a war he cannot run from.

Through gunfights and mortar fire, through last month's ferocious battle for Bunia and the arrival last week of French-led multinational forces who are meant to establish peace, 26-year-old Muhito and other war-battered and disabled people have remained pinned inside the city's nearly deserted General Hospital.

Built by Belgian colonial rulers for whites-only in the 1930s, the hospital later became the main medical facility for Bunia, capital of the Ituri region of northeastern Congo. Overtaxed even in peacetime, it has been overwhelmed by a five-year war that has been largely invisible to the outside world but has left as many as 4.7 million dead around the country.

At times, it is the scene of fighting. On May 12, militiamen of the Lendu tribe killed two of the hospital's patients in their beds. On May 24, fighters from the rival Hema tribe destroyed 3,000 doses of vaccine, donated by international aid groups, when they stole three refrigerators that the vaccines were stored in.

The hospital sits two miles north of the town center, in an area so violent that foreign aid workers and doctors visit only in armored vehicles, escorted by soldiers.

"Please come and talk to me," pleaded Muhito, a former teacher, smiling weakly at a reporter who arrived last week with U.N. soldiers and a doctor from the international aid group Medair. "Where did you go? What did you see? Tell me, is my country dying?"

This is not a place where family members can bring flowers and cards and words of love, or where patients can try to escape pain by watching television comedies or playing cards. Lonely and half-starved, the 50 patients left here are hollow-eyed, their bones framing valleys under their skin as they wait for French soldiers, medical aid, anything to help.

"They are totally helpless in their situation, and it's the epitome of vulnerability that they are at the whim of anything that will happen," said Nigel Pearson, a Bunia-based doctor with Medair, who softly patted them on the back and made conversation. "This is terrible, terrible conditions for anyone. And these people are already in agonizing pain."

About eight local nurses tend the wards, exhausted and working for free. At times, things have been so bad that food aid didn't get through for weeks, and patients and nurses alike had to scrounge to replace the missing rations.

"People are very, very hungry," said Pearson, who spoke in Swahili to patients who clapped and smiled when they saw him walk in. "We are hoping the new forces in town will really lay it on strong and show their teeth to help people like this."

Medical workers in town begged the first batch of peacekeeping troops, which arrived last month, to provide security at the hospital. Twenty Congolese soldiers from the divided country's central government were sent. But just days later they were dispatched to secure the airport due to a spurt in fighting, aid workers said, and the hospital was left unguarded again.

Conditions were so dangerous that two makeshift hospitals were set up elsewhere in Bunia, one across from the U.N. compound in the center of town and another next to the airport. Both are squalid and crowded and protected by barbed wire.

Meanwhile, abductions by tribal fighters are continuing at night. A total of 48 people have been taken from their homes by the Hema-backed rebel group known as the Union of Congolese Patriots, according to U.N. peacekeepers. Aid workers say the missing include children who are reportedly being taken to build a new camp and to serve as soldiers in the northern outskirts of Bunia. Twenty-three bodies have been found, some headless.

Muhito said he was living in the village of Nyankunde, about 25 miles to the north, when Lendu fighters captured it last September. In carnage from guns and rocket launchers, machetes and grenades, several hundred people died, human rights groups estimate. In some ways, Muhito was lucky. The easy-going man had arrived at a hospital in the village the day before the fighting began, to be treated for meningitis, a disease that if left untreated can cause paralysis. After the shooting began, medical workers fled and he did not get his regular doses of medicine. Partial paralysis began setting in.

A nurse named Timothy pushed him and others in wheelchairs through the bush toward Bunia, both to escape the fighting and to get medical attention. They crossed a river and hid for days from rebels during a journey that stretched to two weeks.

Muhito and the dozen or so others were hidden inside the homes of villagers for a while but developed bedsores because they were not turned periodically, as hospital caretakers would know to do, Pearson said.

Eventually they made it to the hospital in Bunia, where they lived through the fighting last month in which at least 475 people were massacred nearby.

Today, Muhito spends his days sitting outside, trying to talk to the other patients in wheelchairs. He speaks three languages and is desperate for conversation, he explained. His smile revealed an optimistic young man, who still hopes to be a teacher again one day, have children and become fluent in English, which he studies from a tattered dictionary.

"Sometimes, I sit here and feel as if I am someone who has already died," Muhito said. "But then we joke and we play the radio if we can, and my life comes back. My anger goes down a little."

The men have started racing in their wheelchairs to pass the time. And some of the young patients at the hospital, whom Muhito likes to watch jump and run, help judge the contest. His favorite is a tiny 6-year-old named Carine Malosi. She has a sweet smile and a child's curiosity as she rolls in the grass and then chases a bug even though she can barely see.

She can't open her left eye, due to ghastly thick machete cuts that run deep across her face, the mutilation inflicted by a Lendu rebel group last year.

Still, Muhito finds her beautiful.

"We all have something to offer this world if we survive," he said, crying and looking out onto the fields where war was still being waged. "I want to make it. I am not afraid."

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