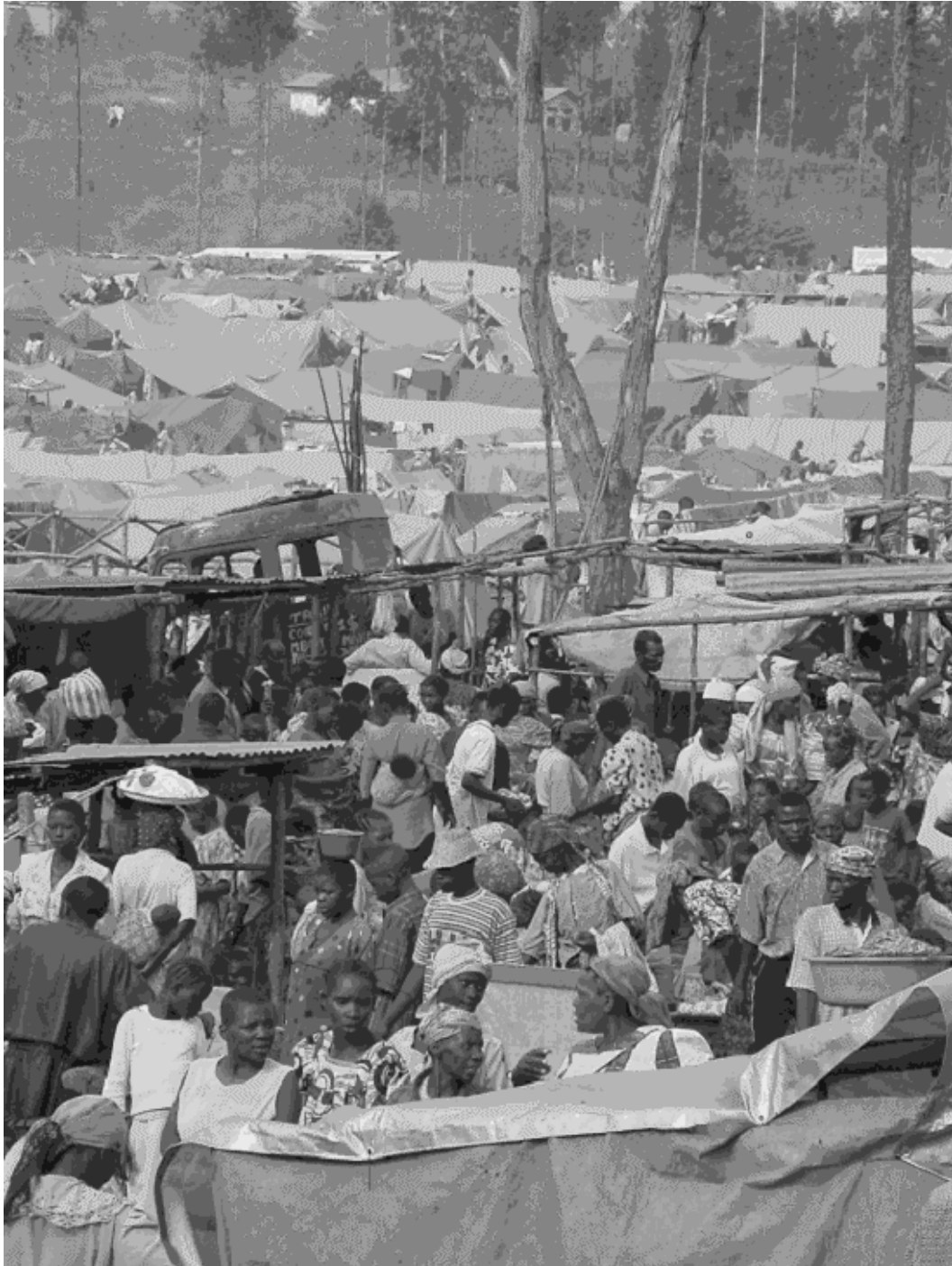


Ituri: Unkept Promises? A Pretense of Protection and Inadequate Assistance



**Médecins Sans Frontières Report
July, 25th 2003**

Table of contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 2 |
| MSF in Ituri..... | 3 |
| 1. A Strengthened Interim Multinational Force: Just a Broken Promise? | 4 |
| 1.1 Bunia—The besieged city is not secured | 4 |
| 1.2 150 000 Bunia Residents Are Beyond the Reach of Operation Artemis | 5 |
| 1.3 Beni, no place of refuge | 6 |
| 2. The War During MONUC’s Deployment | 6 |
| 2.1 From Street Fighting to Systematic Abuses | 6 |
| 2.2 No Security in Bunia | 9 |
| 2.3 Fleeing Bunia—Without Help From MONUC..... | 9 |
| 3. Insufficient Assistance | 11 |
| 3.1 Bunia: The “Returnees” Can Wait..... | 11 |
| 3.2 Surrounding Bunia: The People Aid Forgot | 12 |
| 3.3 Beni—A failure of foresight for months on end | 13 |
| Conclusion | 14 |
| Appendices..... | 15 |

INTRODUCTION

Last May, Bunia, capital of the Ituri region in northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), was the scene of extreme violence. Conflict has persisted in this region since 1998, however since 2001 it has reached a new level of intensity. Several thousand people have been killed and hundreds of thousands more have fled on several occasions.

Neither civilians nor aid workers have been spared these abuses, as shown by the April 2001 killings of six members of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the vicinity of Bunia.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has been present in the DRC since 1988 and has worked intermittently alongside the people of Ituri since 1999. In recent months, as field teams have provided aid to the ill and war-wounded, they have heard victims' accounts of massive violations of international humanitarian law.

The most common interpretation of the violence reduces it to a tribal conflict between the Hema and the Lendu. Ethnic-based ideologies have long been promoted in the region and the means to nurture them have long been available. However, the current ethnic violence has been clearly and deliberately fuelled by the direct and indirect involvement of neighboring countries and by the support of various armed groups. It serves the purposes of these actors by obscuring their competition for political supremacy and control of natural resources.

Victims' and aid workers' accounts illustrate the breadth of violence to which all communities have been subjected. This violence is too widespread to be explained simply by inter-ethnic confrontation. It speaks of a fear that reaches well beyond communal or ethnic affiliation and seems to justify every act of violence.

This war threatens the entire population--from Bunia, scene of factional fighting and crimes against civilians, to Beni, a fragile refuge for civilians, to the Lubero region, where fighting began in early June. From one day to the next, any civilian could find him or herself in the midst of a combat zone, subject to arbitrary mistreatment by any number of armed groups, forced to flee his or her home and obliged to try to survive while in flight.

In April 2003, 600 soldiers from the MONUC reserve battalion (United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) were sent to the region. In June, the European Union deployed a 1,500-member international force. However, we should not forget that these urgent actions sought to address security threats for the residents of Bunia that had been identified long before. Indeed, these forces arrived too late for tens of thousands of people. In just two weeks of violence in early May 2003, hundreds of people were killed and tens of thousands forced to flee Bunia. The fate of tens of thousands more remains unknown. Those who remain survive from day to day under extremely precarious living conditions.

Despite the deployment of MONUC reinforcements in Ituri, along with a European Union "interim emergency force," protection for civilians is far from assured. MSF must point out that these forces have managed to guarantee civilian safety only in several very limited spaces carved out with great effort. Furthermore, emergency aid contributions from the international community and UN agencies have been and continue to be inadequate.

As the UN Security Council prepares to outline the international community's commitment to the DRC for the coming months, Médecins Sans Frontières would like to emphasize that recent military deployments have failed to provide Ituri's civilians with real protection and that aid in the region is inadequate.

MSF In Ituri

MSF has been working in the DRC's government-controlled zone since 1988 and in the rebel-controlled area since 1998.

MSF has had an intermittent presence in Ituri since 1999. In November 2002, a team returned to the area. In January 2003, when residents returned home after two months of fighting and looting, MSF re-opened health centers around Mangina and a 70-bed hospital in Mambasa.

In April, a medical-surgical team began functioning in Bunia, despite the growing insecurity. Initially, this team worked in the central hospital. Following the first violent incidents in town during the first weekend in May and the flight of a large part of the medical personnel, the MSF team was evacuated for several days. On May 15, a second medico-surgical team was sent to Bunia to restart operations. A makeshift operating room was quickly set up and the team was able to treat the wounded. A 70-bed hospital, was then established, in a former supermarket called "Bon Marché".

MSF volunteers managed to treat several thousand inhabitants who remained in Bunia at this improvised hospital, the Clinique Bon Marché. Most of them had gathered around MONUC positions and were living in alarming health conditions. Since then, more than 520 surgical interventions have taken place. On average, 150 external consultations take place every day, and more than 60 patients are hospitalized every week. Following the first confirmed cholera cases, the fear of an epidemic outbreak warranted the urgent installation of a cholera treatment center. Since the month of June, the nutritional status of the population has deteriorated, and the feeding structures already in place are running at full capacity. To deal with this situation, a therapeutic feeding center is being set up to take care of the most severely malnourished.

Since May 19, the teams have also been working with 55,000 displaced persons from Bunia who have taken refuge near Beni, around 150 km (90 miles) south of Bunia. Six thousand of them will be housed in two displaced persons' camps currently under construction. MSF is building shelters, installing a water supply system and providing medical care. A health station has been set up at another 5,000-person camp in Oysha. During the next three months, 17,000 children (under 5) will receive food rations to prevent increased malnutrition.

1. A Strengthened Interim Multinational Force: Just a Broken Promise?

On May 30, 2003, faced with the inability of the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) to protect Ituri's civilian population, the UN Security Council authorized deployment of an "interim emergency multinational force" in Bunia. Under the terms of Resolution 1484, this force will remain in the city until September 1, 2003.

Although Operation "Artemis", under European command Union, has deployed 1,500 soldiers since June 11, the population of Bunia and surrounding areas has yet to receive any real protection. Artemis soldiers were, however, supposed to come to the aid of MONUC troops. For more than a month, those forces were unable to secure the city and assure the population's safety.

1.1 Bunia—The besieged city is not secured

The goal of the "interim emergency force" was to protect civilians and secure the town so that MONUC reinforcements could be deployed in September.

Nearly two months later, some city districts have been temporarily secured. However, daily life remains fraught with danger for many residents who have stayed and for those who risked returning from their exodus. Despite the force deployment, war is always close by. At night, fighters enter certain neighborhoods to loot, kill and terrorize civilians. And the ideologues of hate continue to spread their message calling for killings.

The tasks facing surgeons in the improvised hospital set up by MSF illustrate the ongoing insecurity and lack of protection for civilians. The war wounded began appearing at the hospital in June and they continue to arrive. Nearly 60 percent of patients need orthopedic treatment. Abdominal wounds require immediate surgical intervention, but those victims are often unable to reach the hospital in time. Volunteers at MSF-run facilities have also treated eight cases of rape and the team has received reports of many more.

At the end of June, some groups of Bunia residents who had fled the terrible fighting in May began to return. Some had been forced to survive in the forest for more than two months. The condition of patients admitted to MSF clinics illustrates the harsh living conditions experienced during flight. Severe malnutrition has been diagnosed, particularly among children. Some patients received care for war wounds that had gone untreated for several weeks.

Others who returned did not have the money required to cross the checkpoints set up by local militias and therefore could not continue fleeing further south... But whatever their reasons for coming back to the town, few people choose to return to their old homes and neighborhoods. They fear summary executions and reprisals, which remain widespread, especially at night.

Most of these "returnees" have moved into improvised encampments set up in late May near MONUC positions. Bunia residents who remained in the city and continued to work or attend to their affairs during the day also spend the night in these camps. However, they are not protected from incursions or abuses. People are regularly reported to have disappeared from these camps.

Overall, security in Bunia remains extremely precarious. Despite the situation, MONUC continues to broadcast messages on Radio Okapi, assuring listeners that security has been restored and inviting the displaced persons to return to the city. These broadcasts risk creating a false sense of security among civilians.

Excerpt from a June 7, 2003 MSF Report

A week ago, a 53-year-old grandmother arrived in the “transit zone” from Medu with four children and grandchildren. She had fled there on May 12. The family’s other nine members went to Oicha. She has had no news of them. When she came back, she returned to her house in the “200” neighborhood. It had been looted. That first night, “they knocked on the door,” she says. “We held it closed. They left but we didn’t sleep all night. The next morning we came to the camp.”

1.2 150,000 Bunia Residents Are Beyond the Reach of Operation Artemis

The mission of the interim emergency force is to protect Bunia’s civilian population, but its limited mandate prevents it from being deployed outside the city. Half of Bunia’s residents remain on the city’s outskirts, where they sought refuge. Now they are outside the bounds of international protection.

Some 150,000 people are believed to have fled to areas surrounding Bunia. Upsurges of violence and fighting continue to affect those zones. Villages have been attacked, houses looted and burned, and people killed. The village of Katoto, for example, was attacked several times. The displaced persons in the village were left on their own with no protection. Those who managed to get out described daily lives filled with insecurity and fear.

Since May, MSF teams have been unable to reach people living in villages some 3 to 50 km (1½ to 30 miles) from Bunia for lack of security guarantees from the belligerents. However, this geographical radius is where the most exposed populations live.

Accounts from MSF Teams

Residents of Katoto (25 km or 15 miles northeast of Bunia) are among the latest to arrive at the airport encampment. They spent their first night in the Bunia neighborhood of Central, but were very frightened because people came to loot houses during the night. Katoto was first attacked on *Saturday, June 21*. The following Friday (June 27), fighters returned and burned the remaining huts and houses. Many people died. Those who fled do not want to go back. “*We couldn’t stay there. You expected to die at any moment.*”

An older woman carrying her elderly mother on her back arrived from Lengabo at 1 p.m. They had been walking since 6 a.m. They came from M’Bale, north of Bunia, and had left there in May. Their village was located in an area where they could have been taken for “enemies.” They had nothing more to lose. Their final weeks of flight were harrowing.

A man came from Tinda Zundu (a village between Medu and Bunia) with his wife and 21-year-old daughter. She was carrying her newborn. The young woman was carried in a wooden seat and had bullet wounds in her forearm and leg. She had received the injuries three days earlier when she had gone to her aunt’s house in Makabo with two other girls to get food. They encountered fighters. The two other girls managed to escape, but “*she fought with them and was wounded.*” After providing first aid, we referred her to the Bon Marché hospital. The MSF surgeon said she had never seen such a filthy wound. She did not express an opinion about the young woman’s prospect of recovery, but she may have to undergo amputation.

1.3 Beni – no place of refuge

Just as the interim multinational force was being deployed in Bunia, heavy weapons fighting broke out between RCD-Goma and Congolese army forces south of Beni, extending into several villages. The combat that began in Bingi reached Kanyabayanga and then Lubero. Today, those towns are largely empty.

“There was practically no one in the villages [from Kaseghe to Kitsambiro],” an MSF team member said. “The doors of houses and public buildings remained wide open. It looked as though people had grabbed everything they could when they left. The rest was looted. We saw only four trucks hauling goods along what was usually a heavily-trafficked route.”

The war is getting closer to the town of Beni, where more than 55,000 of Bunia’s residents have taken shelter, thinking they could escape the worst there. On top of these new refugees, Beni and the surrounding areas has also been temporary home to at least 30,000 people from Ituri, Kivu and Maniema, for more than six months. The tens of thousands who fled from Kanyabayanga to Lubero to escape recent fighting could soon increase those numbers. Today, some 250,000 people are wandering in the area south of Ituri. UN troops are not able to contribute to their safety.

2. The War During MONUC’s Deployment

While insecurity persists today despite the arrival of additional forces, the conflict reached new levels of intensity during the May-June period, just as MONUC troops were deployed.

In April, as Ugandan forces were pulling out of the area, several factors suggested that confrontations among armed factions that had been fighting for control of the region for several years might resume, and even reach into the center of the city. In April, MSF had asked the UN peacekeeping operations department to take concrete measures to assure civilian safety during and after the Ugandan troop withdrawal.

Fighting broke out while 600 soldiers from the MONUC reserve battalion were deployed. They had been sent on an urgent basis, but their arrival did not stop the violence, crime and looting from worsening and continuing, day after day, for nearly a month.

2.1 From Street Fighting to Systematic Abuses

After the Ugandan troop withdrawal, Bunia residents expected violence to explode, but few imagined that it would become widespread or that it would affect everyone. MONUC forces were unable either to curb the killings or ease their impact on the civilian populations. Even as the Mission sought to become operational, the fighting redoubled in intensity.

2.1.1 Fighting and A Wave of Terror

The war broke out during the first week of May 2003. It began with heavy weapons attacks in outlying neighborhoods. Bunia’s residents remained hidden in their houses for several days. Explosions reverberated day and night in the city. Gun and machete attacks followed, as did killings of civilians, door-to-door searches, and looting.

“We had stayed in the house so we didn’t know that everyone—from the Sukisa, Nia-nia, Salongo, Sous-région and 200 neighborhoods— had already left the city. It was Monday’s attack that prompted us to flee. It began on Saturday at 5 p.m., with gunfire and shelling from heavy weapons. It went on all night until 6 a.m. When it stopped, we went outside to see what had happened. But by around 11 a.m., we realized it was too dangerous. People were running and fleeing. Some were missing their ears—they had been cut off. We still stayed on. Later, someone protected me so I could flee. The fighter who helped us leave was a friend I’d known for a long time. He helped us at night, secretly, so his friends wouldn’t find out.”¹

On Monday, May 5, the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC) captured Bunia. Fighting with Lendu militias continued throughout the week. People fled their neighborhoods, seeking shelter in other districts or with family and friends. The killings and massacres began.

¹ The statements quoted in this report were gathered by MSF teams between late May and early June from Bunia residents who took refuge in Beni, as well as in Bunia.

“The atmosphere changed even more noticeably beginning the week of May 5. You really felt that things were going to change. There was looting, chaos and heavy weapons fire. People were arrested. They buried you right where they killed you. People were killed in every street and every neighborhood. From May 6 to 12, I saw lots of dead bodies--maybe some 20 people.”

“On Monday, we heard shooting. We could hardly get to the market. There wasn’t much food. We stayed in the house for a week.. Saturday was really bad, so we left Bunia. We heard that the militiamen had arrived in our neighborhood and were killing people in the Cité district. We heard loud gunfire and then we saw people starting to flee.”

“Even when the militiamen took control of the city, people were still settling accounts. When we got up the next morning, we heard that 10 bodies had been found at a certain place. We had to go make sure that none of our relatives were among them. I can’t possibly count the number of friends and family members who died last month, but it’s a lot.”

Abuses and incidents of looting multiplied. The entire city was gripped by fear.

“One night, my brother, who lives in Muzipela, came to tell us that we had to leave. They were killing people with machetes in his neighborhood. The next morning, bullets were flying so we fled.”

“It began on May 7 or 8. Early in the week, they stabbed my father to death. He was old so he had refused to flee. He had locked himself up inside the house. Our neighbors, who fled when he was killed, told me what happened.”

“The looting in Bunia began the week before we fled (Monday, May 11). They were going into houses to take things. If you objected, they killed you.”

2.1.2 “This Wasn’t Our War...”

Until then, Bunia residents who were neither of the Hema or the Lendu communities had not felt threatened by what they called “the others’ war.” They managed, as best they could, to keep their distance from the “*vita kikabila*” (tribal war), careful to avoid personal or financial conflicts with the rotating group of those in charge.

But this time, the violence didn’t discriminate. It affected everyone. The war had rarely reached such levels of intensity for the entire population.

“I had never fled Bunia. We stayed closed up inside while they fought day and night. Militiamen died but they didn’t attack the general population, except for people from the Lendu and Hema tribes.”

“Inter-ethnic conflict started a long time ago but violence against all the tribes was new. On the radio, they said they were going to kill everyone who wasn’t born there (Jajambo).”

“ It was awful. When your neighbors-- people you’ve known forever--start killing, then it’s time to leave.”

“This was the first time I had left Bunia; the first time I had fled because of the war. This time, the war was really terrible. I never want to go back to Bunia. It was dangerous. Things went too far.”

2.1.3 A Campaign of Orchestrated Terror to Empty the City

The violence may have been carried out indiscriminately, but statements from witnesses and victims show that it was quite organized. Fighters and militiamen turned to terror. They conducted door-to-door raids (armed men sometimes tricked residents into opening their doors), killed entire families or certain family members in front of others, mutilated, tortured, and issued public calls inciting people to hatred and murder.

All parties to the conflict exploited the populations' suffering to justify the war and the abuses. Neutrality was impossible. If you wanted to be defended, you had to take sides...

"They came and knocked on everyone's door—except mine. Was I just lucky? It was a matter of luck, but lots of people had bad luck.."

"They killed my husband by slitting his throat. They came onto our plot of land. I was saved because I was in the bedroom when they cut my husband's throat. I heard a noise so I came to look. I went back into the bedroom and jumped out of the window. I threw myself into the flowerbed and stayed there, very quietly. I was there, shivering in the flowers, for a long time. When I got up, I saw my husband's body. Our two sons-in-law who were also in the house had disappeared. Were they kidnapped? Did they flee? I couldn't bear to stay in Bunia. People just wanted to kill."

After an episode of fighting or killings, bodies were left visible to make an impression on people.

"I found two bodies behind my house. There were a lot more in the market on Thursday, Friday and Saturday."

"The morning we fled, there were five bodies in front of my house. No one could bury them because you could be killed in the time it took you to do it. Even the Red Cross couldn't do it."

"There were three corpses in my garden. Their hands, heads and ears had been cut off. I was really afraid. I didn't need to stay in Bunia any more but you couldn't leave. It was this anger that really frightened me, the anger that made people mutilate bodies."

2.2 No Security in Bunia

Beginning in early May, Bunia's residents headed for MONUC positions or adjoining areas in search of protection and to distance themselves from the city. They still did not anticipate that fighting could last more than a few days and force them to flee.

But the MONUC base provided no more security than their homes. MONUC troops just stood by as violence surged, notifying the UN Secretary General and the media of developments day after day. Militias even entered the MONUC base as the troops watched and took displaced people away. Although MONUC's deployment had been announced as a response to growing chaos, it became clear that 600 soldiers cannot maintain order and security in a city of 200,000 gripped by fighting.

"When the war started in Bunia, we went to MONUC to hide. It was Saturday and things were still very unsafe. The MONUC soldiers didn't do a thing. They just watched. I saw militiamen enter the MONUC base and take people away (a man) to kill them." (Ed. note: the speaker did not see the person being killed.)

"We didn't want to go to MONUC. My sister-in-law and three of her children were kidnapped there. My wife wanted to get the children who remained. She disguised herself as a crazy woman (so that she wouldn't be stopped) and they let her through. She brought the children back."

2.3 Fleeing Bunia—Without Help From MONUC

Bunia's residents, especially those in the city center, had lived with war for several years. For them, it had meant sporadic explosions of violence. But this time, it was so intense that many fled.

Over the course of several days, more than two-thirds of the population left the city. After two weeks of violence, MSF volunteers described a ghost town populated only by looted houses.

"This time, people who'd resisted up to that point finally left. It was very difficult. Even those who said they would never leave did."

MONUC was no more capable of protecting the fleeing inhabitants than of averting their flight. The Mission took no steps to evacuate civilians living in combat zones or transfer them to safer areas.

"It was by the grace of God that some people from Bunia managed to get here because many of them didn't make it." (A Bunia resident who took refuge in Beni.)

Flight was punctuated by "screenings" accompanied by arbitrary killings and systematic theft of the few goods the displaced had with them.

A long stream of families started off on the major road heading west (the Komanda road). Those who lived in the city had no idea how to survive in the forest. Uncertainty and the dangers of flight added to the terror of those first weeks.

2.3.1 The Chai Attack, 14 Km (8 Miles) from Bunia

Displaced people report that as they fled on the weekend of May 21, men hidden along the side of the road ambushed them, firing heavy weapons and guns on the civilians along the road. People panicked in the attack and the group dispersed. There were deaths and injuries and many families became separated at that time.

"We started walking, but when we got close to Chai, armed soldiers attacked us. I lost my husband then. He fled the attack by the other side. A man died of a heart attack. The soldiers were hidden along the road and shot us with pistols. Many people were killed or injured. There were many people with us then who have still not arrived here."

2.3.2 Selection Operations at the Checkpoints

The militias set up checkpoints along the road leading to Beni to control all travel. Anyone who wanted to pass had to show identity papers and pay for a "travel permit" (\$5 for 20 people, for example). According to certain accounts, some people were taken away on the basis of their supposed membership in a specific group. They were sent to the "laboratory" or killed at the side of the road in view of the displaced people.

"Hema people didn't get through. I saw a mother and her 19-year-old daughter—I knew them--killed at the checkpoint."

"Along the road, four boys we knew well were walking behind us. They were friends of my son and often came to our house. We heard them cry out. They were being attacked with machetes."

"If they saw that you belonged to the other group, they would pull you out and kill you. I saw a mother and child in the line killed that way."

The militiamen first checked the identity cards of those individuals they wanted to hold back. This revealed where they were born. Anyone lacking an identity card was subject to reprisals and would have to pay ransom or be beaten. On the other hand, possessing a security card offered no guarantees either. Although

it theoretically enabled the “undesirables” to be identified, other characteristics—language or physical appearance, for example—were also used as selection criteria.

2.3.3 Extortion

The displaced people were subject to extortion at every step of the way. Everything—money and personal belongings—was fair game. In addition to organized extortion—for example, being forced to buy a travel permit according to “established rules” with payment based on the number of people in the group—displaced persons were also stripped of the few belongings they had managed to take with them or the clothes they were wearing when they left.

“When we fled, we took our mattresses and our clothes, but those were stolen along the way. They even took my shoes. They took everything from us at the first checkpoint. At the other checkpoints, they hit us.”

“I arrived here with only my underwear and a pair of pants. They took everything else from me at the checkpoint.”

2.3.4 Exodus Through the Forest

“We waited to go into the forest with other people because we live in the city. We don’t know the roads or how to survive in the brush.”

The displaced persons from Bunia are city-dwellers. After several days’ walk, they entered the equatorial forest. They often slept on the ground and sometimes on leaves. They ate roots and wild fruits and drank out of ponds.

“I left my town because I wanted to be safe. We slept in the bush, wherever we could, for a month. We ate roots and squeezed the juice out to protect against malaria. We would go into other people’s fields to find food.”

“We had no idea where we were or what we were doing. First we went into the savannah... When we passed Medu, the path ended. We walked through reeds, we fell into the water and we climbed mountains. ... We slept outside.”

All along the way, the displaced had to pay for help. Local residents offered to transport belongings and ill people, or serve as guides and help the displaced people cross rivers.

The individuals interviewed spoke of ill and elderly people who had to be left along the way. Women gave birth, often alone. Some resumed their flight immediately after childbirth.

“There was a granny with a fractured pelvis. Her family left her on the road. She was old and alone. We took her with us on a stretcher that we built. When we reached the next village, we left her in an empty house. She had fallen that same morning.”

In the end, neither MONUC forces nor the “interim emergency force” helped guarantee the populations’ safety, except within a few limited areas of Bunia.

3 – Insufficient Assistance

When a new multinational force was designated for Ituri in June, the most optimistic observers interpreted the move as signaling the international community’s desire to aid people who suffered through several weeks of a particularly deadly conflict. According to Security Council resolution 1484, the goal of this new deployment was “to improve the humanitarian situation.” But two months later, residents of Bunia and the surrounding areas still lack the most basic

elements of survival. While this situation may be the result of insecurity, it is also the result of failure to anticipate needs and to deploy aid accordingly.

3.1 Bunia: The “Returnees” Can Wait

More than 12,000 people who had been displaced by the fighting returned to Bunia over a period of several weeks, drawn by the presence of the international force. People living in outlying areas also came to take refuge there. In a city with ongoing security problems they tried to find the means to survive, yet food, drinking water and shelter were in short supply.

The newest arrivals at the displaced persons’ camps have gone without aid for several days before being registered and finally becoming eligible for access to drinking water and emergency distributions of food, dishes, and building materials. Yet these distributions are vital for those who, after spending weeks in the forest, have lost everything.

Because of inadequate supplies, food distributions to date have provided only 700 kilocalories/day, which meets only one-third of an adult’s daily nutritional needs. Very few distributions have been conducted in the city itself. As of mid-July, only one piece of plastic sheeting has been distributed for every three families (around 15 people) in these transit areas.

The precarious nutritional status of the “returnees” prompted MSF to open an intensive feeding center. Today, regular food distributions for the entire population absolutely must get underway. The distribution process has been slow, due in part to the current lack of an adequately supplied and organized World Food Programme (WFP) pipeline. In addition, logistical capacities remain limited; continued fighting makes it difficult to transport supplies by road.

Reception conditions—from protection and security to nutrition and living conditions—are clearly inadequate. If people continue to return to Bunia, the situation could become catastrophic, especially given that cholera and dysentery² cases are still being recorded.

Accounts from MSF Teams

At the airport encampment, the new arrivals from Medu spent two days in the covered transit area before receiving a single piece of tarpaulin for three families. They had nothing. They are among those who were able to take advantage of a distribution of cooking utensils and food, including a 25-kg (55-lb) bag of corn flour for two families, 1 ½ bottles of oil per family and five kg (10 lbs) of beans per family. Each family also received a bar of soap. They are all from Bunia, but say they cannot return to the “rougher” neighborhoods of Mudzi Pela, Kindia and N’gesi. “You can’t go back unless there are soldiers in every neighborhood.”

The new arrivals stay in a transit shelter (a single raised tarp) while waiting to be assigned a spot and receive tokens for food distributions. More than 150 families arrived during the last few days. In general, their health is poor. Many have skin infections or wounds that have gone untreated for several weeks. They have often not eaten for at least two days and have been undernourished for months. Furthermore, they arrive here with nothing and must wait several days to receive aid.

3.2 Surrounding Bunia: The People Aid Forgot

Because of security problems, aid workers are still unable to reach the “grey zones” around Bunia. The few NGOs³ working in the region cannot provide aid to the more than 100,000 people who live there. News of killings on Bunia’s

² Both cholera and dysentery are endemic diseases in this region

³ The International Committee of the Red Cross has not worked in the region since six of its members were killed in April 2001.

outskirts reaches the city every week, often confirmed by the arrival of newly displaced and wounded persons fleeing the violence.

3.3 Beni—A failure of foresight for months on end

Until early June, Beni was a relatively safe area. Displaced persons have been arriving there for several months. While 30,000 displaced persons had been there for six months without receiving any food, it took the WFP more than three weeks after 55,000 displaced persons arrived from Bunia to organize a distribution—of half-rations—in early June. (The distribution was held from June 8 to 15.)

The WFP has also scheduled distributions of partial rations in July and August because of inadequate supplies. Once again, only those identified as the weakest will be able to take advantage of these distributions.

This type of “targeted” food distribution is generally intended for individuals who are partially self-sufficient. This is certainly not the case for people who have just arrived and whose belongings have been systematically confiscated and looted, especially in a region marked by war, where employment is rare and food expensive.

Rapid surveys conducted by World Vision among displaced persons in mid-July show that while severe malnutrition may not be a serious problem, a significant number of children are at risk of malnutrition. To avoid a further decline in the situation, MSF purchased 300 tons of food to provide a 3-month supply of supplementary feeding to the 17, 000 children under 5 years among the displaced persons.

As of mid-July 2003, there were still not enough relief supplies for victims of the war in Ituri.

The international community’s aid commitments are hardly more significant than its protection efforts. The UN agencies’ presence is minimal with respect to resources and staff. Institutional funds to underwrite aid operations are insufficient to meet the growing needs.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, the two armed international forces present in Ituri (MONUC and the interim emergency force) have proven to be unable to ensure genuine protection for civilians. With its mandate limited to the city of Bunia, the “interim emergency force” also ignores the several thousand civilians still on the outskirts of the city, civilians the few humanitarian organizations in the field have been unable to reach these people for months: MSF is particularly concerned about their fate.

With the UN Security Council preparing to decide whether to strengthen the MONUC presence in Ituri, **MSF notes that in the past, UN peacekeeping forces have failed miserably on multiple occasions in their mission to protect civilians. In Bosnia and Rwanda, such failures ended with the deaths of several thousand people.**

Having witnessed these painful experiences, **MSF urges the international community not to give, once again, a dangerous illusion of protection to the civilian population of Ituri.**

Whatever the decisions regarding the mandate and means of the international presence in Ituri, **MSF calls on the Security Council to keep its promises to protect civilians--not to sacrifice them to other political objectives, as was the tragic case in the Srebrenica “safe haven.”**

Furthermore, available aid is far from meeting the region’s needs. UN agencies and institutional donors must be mobilized to provide substantially increased humanitarian assistance to civilian victims of the war in Ituri.



© Juan Carlos Tomasi

APPENDICES

The International Community in the Congolese Conflict

For several years, a deadly and widespread conflict has been underway involving a variety of political and military groups. The international community reacted to this crisis by taking various diplomatic and military measures, which were inadequate to address the breadth of the conflict and its tragic impacts for the Congolese population. Since 1997, two million people have died in this war (source: US Centers for Disease Control). This figure illustrates the inadequacy of international effort to protect civilians.

Most of the countries neighboring the DRC are affected by the war. Some are providing shelter to Congolese refugees while others--like the governments of Uganda and Rwanda-- have intervened, more or less directly, in the conflict or its resolution in the name of preserving and developing their political, territorial, economic or security interests.

Since 1997, some African countries that do not border the DRC have also intervened under the auspices of an international "buffer" force or of bilateral alliances.

Several Western countries, including the US, Britain and France, have supported development of a peace plan for the DRC during the last year. This effort is in addition to several undertaken by African governments. They also supported the Pretoria and Sun City conferences.

This renewed, fairly concerted interest has been accompanied by increased resources for the UN 2003 budget totals \$500 million and theoretically provides for a force of 8,700 soldiers. Only 5,500 were, in fact, deployed.

POPULATION MOVEMENTS IN ITURI AND NORTH KIVU



Arjan Erkel, Médecins Sans Frontières head of mission in Dagestan, was kidnapped almost a year ago, on August 12th 2002. His whereabouts are still unknown.