**“And then I had to flee, and no one was able to distribute medication to the population. The armed groups decided that it was my fault.”**

*Pierre Yakanza Gouassi was the assistant coordinator for the MSF project in Zemio, in the Central African Republic (CAR), from 7 December 2015 to 31 December 2017. He was the first contact with the community, responsible for raising awareness among the community of the principles of MSF, its health promotion activities, and relevant security matters. When the security situation no longer allowed the international team to stay in Zemio permanently, he united the local team to continue providing essential healthcare to the population.*

**What happened in 2007 in Zemio?**

It was difficult. I remember that everything was going well in 2016, life was peaceful, and relations were good between the two communities (Christian and Muslim). Life in Zemio was calm. 2017 was a surprise. We knew that sooner or later there might be problems, but we never believed that the situation would deteriorate to this point.

Everything started on 28 June at 8 o’clock in the morning. I was at the police station for a meeting when I heard the first explosions. They were coming from the Muslim quarter, 200 metres from the MSF base, and then they spread to the rest of the town. I ran towards the hospital. Everyone was fleeing: to the hospital, the police station, the administrative offices… The shots lasted all day. When it was calmer, members of the MSF team who had been stuck at the base joined us at the hospital.

**Where was your family?**

I found my family at the hospital. That morning, my wife had gone to the market but my children were at the house. Because of the gunshots she wasn’t able to return to get them, and it was the eldest brother who brought the three younger ones to the hospital. That first day we didn’t have anything except for the chicken that my wife had bought at the market and kept in her hand when she fled. We didn’t have any utensils to cook it with, but in any case we didn’t have much of an appetite because of the explosions. We slept lying on the gravel and very early the next morning we returned to the house to pick up a few things. I knew from the beginning that this situation would continue, that’s why I started to build a shelter for my family at the hospital wall with some large branches. When I saw my neighbors building theirs with a few twigs, I told them, “We’re here for a long time; your shelters are never going to hold with the rain.” We stayed at the hospital nearly two months before events forced us to flee elsewhere. At the beginning of the conflict, we were around 7,000 people, then 14,000, then 28,000 because everyone arrived.

**Which events are you referring to?**

First of all, there was the entry of three armed men into the hospital on 11 July… They were demanding that we hand over the Fula family that was there. They said that if no one spoke, they would shoot everyone. The MSF staff who were inside shut the door to prevent them from entering, but they started to shoot with a gun and finally forced open the door. They shot at a member of MSF whose life was only saved because his colleague shoved him out of the way of the bullet. But unfortunately a bullet hit the Fula child. After that the men left, threatening to come back. It was hard. Everyone was shocked. Outside the hospital, people are unfortunately used to seeing children killed, even pregnant women. There is always loss of human life during conflict. But this should never happen in a hospital.

**Did they come back? What was the decisive moment for the population of Zemio?**

In August there was another attack on the hospital. Armed men waited from 3 o’clock in the morning and attacked when people started moving. We were just coming to the end of our morning meeting with MSF colleagues. They shot six bullets in my direction. I crawled to get away. The rest of the team shut themselves in the meeting room. When the armed men finally came in, they thought that the room had been abandoned and didn’t force it, but they robbed the whole hospital. There were several deaths and injuries. The fighting lasted from 8 o’clock in the morning until 4 o’clock in the afternoon. I crawled in the grass in the direction of the forest, getting up to move forward when there was a bit of calm and then lying back down with the shooting started again. It took me 8 hours to go two kilometres. I found my family in the forest and we went to a village a bit further along. Everyone decided to flee the hospital that day and a few people started to cross the river to seek refuge in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

**Why did you decide to stay in Zemio?**

I decided to stay a little longer in Zemio because since the departure of the international MSF staff, it was my responsibility to continue the medical activities. With the Zemio team, we decided to keep working, even if we didn’t feel well, because we knew that if we didn’t do anything the situation would become really catastrophic. If we didn’t do it, no one would look after the victims. It was after the last conflict in Zemio, at the beginning of October, that I decided to leave the town. I had stayed there alone with Father Marcel, one of our guards. My family had already left for DRC, like the rest of the MSF team. Father Marcel had been killed in the fighting and at that point, I decided to flee as well. I wasn’t really sure where to go, but I knew that if I went in the direction of the forest I would finish by reaching the river and would be able to cross in a kayak towards DRC.

**Did you return after that?**

From the moment I left CAR for DRC, I became an enemy of the armed groups in Zemio. That was very hard for me. Up until then, I had been able to distribute some medications to the whole community thanks to the good relationship that I had with them since my arrival in Zemio. They trusted me. When I had to flee, no one distributed medication anymore and the armed groups decided that it was my fault and threatened me personally. I was evacuated to Bangui for medical reasons in December and I didn’t return to Zemio, but my family is still there. When the situation is calmer I will go and get them to bring them back to Bangui. Myself, I am ready to return to work in the province, but in Zemio I don’t know. We lost a lot. The medications, the community’s good were stolen; all the houses were set on fire. The children didn’t go to school for the whole year. No authority has come back to Zemio, the people there feel abandoned. Over there, there is no administrative or local authority. There is no order. Each person does what they want at any moment. Perhaps the situation would improve if there were authorities present in Zemio. The people who fled to DRC are starting to come back. The Muslims and the Christians are starting to talk again, the community is ready to forgive, but how long will it last?

*MSF ended its emergency medical activities in the town of Zemio in December 2017. The closure of the project had been planned since the beginning of the year but was disrupted owing to the fighting that shook the region. The current situation no longer allows for MSF to conduct emergency medical activities because, while protection needs remain, the medical needs have reduced because the majority of the population of Zemio has fled to DRC and organizations based in CAR do not have the authorization to intervene there.*

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<http://www.msf.org/en/article/central-african-republic-brutal-end-short-life-killing-baby-hospital-cars-east>

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