**FIRST PERSON PIECE**

**D.R. Congo: “Months later, they still can’t remove the bloodstains from the soil”**

***MSF emergency coordinator Jean-Pierre Amigo, just back from Kasai province, describes burned villages, mass graves and a woman’s abandoned suitcase.***

“The conflict in the Kasai region took people by surprise. Everyone has a different story. In some places, armed men arrived peacefully and tried to convince local people to join them. Others woke to find themselves under attack. Some villagers heard of attacks happening nearby and fled, leaving everything behind.

Generally, people experienced an extremely high level of violence. In a village people still can’t remove the bloodstains from the soil. In another village, months after the fighting ended, you can see children playing alongside human remains – they have become part of their normal environment.

Some people fled to neighbouring Angola, others to larger towns like Tshikapa. Others spent months hiding in the forests, living in very harsh conditions with little to eat.

People in small villages with farms nearby managed to survive with the very little they had. People know their surroundings well – they know where to find fruit and others. For townspeople, who don’t have similar coping mechanisms, it was more difficult.

The town of Kabilengu became more and more crowded as villagers from the surrounding area took refuge there. Eventually they ran out of food. Kabilengu used to produce diamonds, so the population didn’t have the means to generate other resources. As a consequence, malnutrition levels were very high.

But many of them, wherever they lived, were affected by malaria, as mosquitoes are everywhere.

With most of the area now accessible, people have started returning – even to the hardest-hit villages, the ones that were looted and burnt to the ground. Often the local chief goes first, to assess the situation and see what the needs are. And the needs are huge.

When people arrive back in their home villages, they have to build a new house. And they have to build it without tools. Normally houses are made of bricks, but now they try to get hold of a few sheets of iron that weren’t burnt. When they reach the roof, they have to use wood, as it’s the wrong season for the dry grass usually used to cover roofs. Because of the rains, you can’t stay in the open without a roof.

Their tools – their machetes and hoes – were taken by the armed men, as they were seen as weapons. Their seeds are also missing, so it’s very difficult to grow crops now. On top of that, most of their cattle have been looted and eaten, very often on spot.

In places like Kamako, the traces of violence are evident in the landscape. Beyond the obvious destruction and the mass graves, you suddenly notice small details: on the side of a road, a woman’s abandoned luggage; a suitcase spilling out music CDs… What happened to the woman? Why is the case open? Did she manage to run away?

Society has been broken apart and it will take time to heal. Some people won’t return to their places of origin anytime soon. Too much is too much.

As we move forward, increasing our aid in rural areas and trying to help the health system become functional again, I can confirm that the humanitarian response to this crisis has been vastly inadequate for a crisis of this magnitude.”

***MSF mobile medical teams are travelling to villages across Kasai province to treat people in need of medical care, in particular malnourished children, and resupply local health centres with medicines and equipment. MSF is also supporting a hospital and three health centres in Tshikapa, and has helped set up 10 outpatient therapeutic feeding centres in the surrounding area.* *Between June and September 2017, MSF teams in Kasai province provided more than 5,000 paediatric consultations, treated nearly 1,000 children for severe acute malnutrition, carried out more than 200 surgeries, treated more than 155 people for violence-related injuries and provided care for 30 survivors of sexual violence.***

***In the Kasai Central province, MSF has been supporting Kananga Provincial Hospital since April 2017 and in June MSF started also to assist victims of sexual violence.***

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