

## **NEWS FROM CHARLOTTE PASSMORE FROM MWESO, CONGO; Nurse with MSF**

I'm working as the outreach nurse for the Mweso project, as team leader with a team of national staff - 3 outreach nurses, one midwife, one mental health counsellor, one nutritionist and 8 'agent communautaire', who are responsible for community sensitization and health education. Under the 'agent communautaires' there are 350 'relais communautaires', who are elected by the local communities as lay community health workers. They are based in different communities through the zone and help with health promotion, community sensitization, and also assist with monitoring the humanitarian situation and the movement of displaced populations, as well as promoting MSF principles of neutrality and impartiality, to maintain our acceptance and security. The goal is to be understood and to send & understand clear messages including security data.

The outreach team supports 5 different health centers throughout the zone, which are run by the ministry of health. Supporting these health centers involves providing medical and logistical supplies, supervision of care, providing trainings and monitoring/evaluating and hopefully improving the quality of care provided by the clinics. There is a large 300 bed MSF referral hospital in Mweso, where they can transfer complicated cases, cases requiring surgery or blood transfusions, severe cases of malnutrition, malaria, etc. Most of the expat team works in the hospital but I'm out and about in the community with the outreach team, which I really enjoy. We also recently took over the management of 3 malaria clinics in another area, which we'll be supporting until at least the end of August. There's a massive outbreak of malaria ongoing, which has required an increased response from MSF and the emergency team in North Kivu.

Due to the ongoing conflict and insecurity, there are increasing numbers of displaced populations with many living in poorly managed camps with little access to water, proper sanitation, food and shelter, causing increased vulnerability to diseases, especially malaria. Apparently there was a distribution of mosquito nets by the ministry of health recently but it was poorly done, resulting in my people not receiving a net.

Malaria is a major ongoing problem here, yellow fever and cholera are endemic, and we are seeing quite a lot of malnutrition, despite the ground being so fertile here. The real struggle is the ongoing conflict and insecurity in the zone, which

means people are often displaced and unable to cultivate. Thankfully MSF is really well accepted here and we maintain constant contact with representatives from various armed groups so that we can be sure that if something is going down somewhere, we are not present. The contacts are generally really up front in saying whether it's safe for us to travel to a certain area or not. They don't share detailed plans with us or anything but if we make contact to explain our intention to travel to a certain area they will generally let us know who is in control and whether it is safe for us to travel there or not. Unfortunately it means that our plans always have to be flexible.

The real work right now is strategic planning, which is quite interesting but very daunting, considering I've only been in the project for two weeks and am still trying to wrap my head around the context and how things work here. We need to submit plans in the next few weeks, which will inform the strategic direction of the project for the rest of 2016 and 2017. The project has been really hospital focused and there is a tremendous push to expand the outreach team, to increase the amount of clinics we support, to increase our activities in the zone to try to improve primary health care, health promotion, and prevention. Unfortunately I don't really have any pictures to share at this moment as it is generally advised to avoid taking photos. I have a few of us driving in the bush, but not any of our activities as yet. I'll try to take some but it's difficult.

As far as social life here on the base, the team is quite small but really nice. We had an awesome staff party last Friday with all our national staff where there was awesome Congolese music and some of the most impressive dance moves I've ever seen. Man, the Congolese know how to dance, incredible! Any event is always very ceremonial with a set programme and lots of speeches. We had 2 goats for the occasion, which was much enjoyed by all. I'm also taking a French course on Saturday afternoons and a beginner's Swahili course on Sunday afternoons, both with a local teacher, looking forward to improving my communication hopefully!