

Success stories from Merlin in south-east CAR

MERLIN

Merlin has had a continued presence in south eastern region of Central Africa Republic since 2010, starting operations in Rafai sub-prefecture and extending into Obo in 2011. Arriving in December 2010, Merlin was the first international non-governmental organization (INGO) to provide health care services to the displaced and forgotten population. Amidst a lot of curious gazes, Merlin dared to go where no-one had been since the LRA attacks in the south east began in 2009, causing thousands to flee their homes and seek refuge in the IDP camps in Rafai.

Through US funding, Merlin was able to rehabilitate facilities and to provide emergency primary health care. Merlin continues through this funding to serve the 16,000-strong population of Rafai, as well as the influx of 10,000 people from neighbouring villages, more of whom arrive every week. There have been at least 10 LRA attacks in the Rafai area in 2012 alone and Merlin is providing health assistance to the victims as well as families living up to 75kms away.

Merlin has also set up base in Obo after the departure of CAM (Committee Aide Medicale) a French-based INGO that closed down abruptly in July 2011, leaving the already very vulnerable population of 12,377 people desperate for health care. Merlin has taken on the Obo hospital, which is the main prefectural hospital serving 164,000 persons in the province. Merlin is currently working on initial and basic rehabilitation and equipping it at a cost of \$50,000 and is still seeking more funding to complete it.



Story 1:



Anatole Batiedi is an internally displaced person (IDP) living in Rafai Camp 1. He was selected by the community and Merlin has trained him as a community health worker. This is a story of how Anatole and Merlin came to know each other.

For several years Anatole had been suffering from severe chest pains and vomiting blood. He visited the dilapidated, poorly-stocked and bat-infested Rafai Health Centre on several occasions without success. For the past two years, the nurse at the health centre has repeatedly told him that his illness could not be treated in Rafai and continuously referred him to the Regional Hospital of Bangassou (132kms away) for appropriate treatment. Anatole felt discouraged and desperate each time he heard this because he knew that he could not afford to get there. With a shortage of transport, the only way was in a weather-beaten truck on its way back from delivering supplies. This trip would take an unpredictable 7 - 21 days to get to the referral hospital due to broken bridges and ravines along the way.

One evening shortly after the arrival of Merlin in Rafai Anatole began to vomit blood again and this time it was worse than before. He fell unconscious and was rushed to the Rafai Health Centre. Where once his chances of survival would have been very poor, this time things were different. The newly rehabilitated and equipped centre was able to provide him with immediate medical attention to stabilise him before the Merlin vehicle rushed him to

the Regional Hospital of Bangassou. The road was in a very poor condition but the Merlin-trained driver was experienced and Anatole was accompanied by

a Merlin nurse. At Bangassou, he was immediately hospitalised and Merlin picked up the tab for his treatment.

“If Merlin had not come to our community, I think I would have died that day. Merlin helped me to cheat death and many in the village can now benefit from the new centre.”

Anatole is now a healthy member of his community and he continues to serve those who have been displaced by war.

Story 2:

Marguerite, (not her real name) 15, was abducted and taken to the LRA camps in the south east of Central African Republic.

After four months as a “sex- slave” for the LRA militia in their camp, Marguerite escaped when she was sent to find yams in the forest. This was just one of the many instances of punishment. Forced to be a “wife” to a man her father’s age, she recalls. ‘He would beat me if I refused to do as he said. He would lock me up in a dark room for days and would feed me on very little’. Marguerite ran through the forest unsure of her whereabouts and tried to find her bearings, to follow footpaths and still keep out of sight from the rebels who would soon be out looking for her. She knew very well that if she was caught, this time her punishment would be certain death.

After days of wandering through the forest, during which time she lived on wild fruits and water from dirty streams she found herself on the main road that leads to Rafai. Villagers recognized her need. She was dirty, hungry, tired and her clothes were torn and tattered. It was the only dress she owned, the same dress she had been wearing on the day of her abduction four months ago. The dress had been cut up in places by the rebels to make cords to tie her hands as a captive and those of the other victims at the time of abduction.

Marguerite bears a faint smile and her eyes light up as she recalls when she was first received into the Merlin supported Rafai Health Centre . She recalls how the Merlin nurse received her and took care of her. At the time of her arrival she was very wasted, suffering greatly from septic wounds on her legs and feet (she had escaped barefoot) and worse still, severe lower abdominal pain after months of repeated sexual abuse (a sex-slave is common property among the rebels). She was treated for sexu-

ally transmitted infections and the wound infections on her legs and feet. Her physical wounds healed well and she was also referred to receive psychological and social support. She now is learning tailoring at the nearby Catholic Mission which is run by the Sisters of St. Francis and hopes to return to her family who live in a nearby village about 50kms away.

Marguerite is living a serene life and she is very hopeful of her future. She would like to forget what happened and instead focus on her dreams of a bright future where there is peace, security and dignity for all.

Story 3:

Timothy was a nurse and head of the health centre of Guerekindo Health Post. He recalls the terrible day when the little village which he called home for most of his 35 years was turned into rubble and ashes by the LRA. The rebels attacked unexpectedly, killing scores and kidnapping both children and women.

While the remaining villagers moved to a camp in Rafai (50 km) away, Timothy fled and crossed the border into DRC as a refugee. He spent many sleepless nights in fear of stumbling across the LRA who combed the forests of DRC that border CAR. He found out that his family now lived in Rafai across the River Chinko in CAR and his single thought was to get back with them and let them know he was alright.



Timothy during training session with his colleague.

Eventually he made it safely into Rafai, and then Agoumar village. It was a poignant moment when he was re-united with his family. Soon he had been elected as the representative of the displaced people in the village. When Merlin set up camp in that

area, Timothy was identified and he now heads the temporary health post of Agoumar that Merlin established to serve the internally displaced people (IDPs) in this area.

When the Merlin team arrived, Timothy took us round the camp and offered us his family home as a temporary shelter for Merlin to start the mobile clinics. The community was delighted and set off right away to set it up. This shelter was set up on his family's land, which they donated to the community for Merlin to set up activities. Merlin in collaboration with the Ministry of Health was happy to have him back into the health system and re-integrate him. He had been reported missing while in DRC and the Ministry of Health (MOH) and community thought he had been abducted. Merlin gave him the opportunity to help his community again as an IDP.

Today Timothy runs the the Agoumar Health Post supported by Merlin through USAID / OFDA funds and has benefitted from numerous trainings and workshops on improved Primary Health Care practices.

Story 4:

Lydie is 18 years old. After she lost her first baby through a still-birth, she was diagnosed as having a restricted pelvis that prevented her from having normal delivery. Fortunately she did not suffer a fistula, but with her second pregnancy, Lydie was very afraid that she would lose another child. Lydie was assured by the Merlin staff at Rafai Health Centre that with the renovation of the health facility, she now had access to a caesarean section (C-section) which was the best option for her. Lydie was able to overcome her fear and the C-section was successful. Lydie is now in good health with her baby, no longer afraid about giving birth. She now advocates and encourages her peers to go to the health centre for health care.

Story 5

Lapou, 51, collapsed after suffering for a long time from a severe headache, blurred vision and an abnormal heart rate.



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He was rushed to the Obo hospital by his family who had heard from the Community Health Workers trained by Merlin and the local Radio news that there was a newly appointed doctor; drugs were available and care was free.

At the hospital the doctor diagnosed that Lapou was suffering from severe high blood pressure and it was evident that he was at a high risk of having a stroke. He received proper treatment and is now in good health. He says "*Singila Mingi na Merlin a Kotazo ti mou mamboko*" which means "Thank you to Merlin and its donors"!!

Story 6

Giselle, 42, hails from Mboki which is 75kms away from Obo. She was admitted to Obo Hospital for two weeks after suffering from middle chest pains, anorexia and weight loss.

Giselle said that she heard about Merlin from relatives who live in Obo. The Mboki health facility lacks a medical doctor and qualified nurses. Her mother therefore decided to take her to Obo hospital.



At the Obo Hospital, supported by Merlin through UNICEF and USAID Funds, the doctor discovered that she was suffering from a gastric ulcer. She received appropriate treatment and she recovered quickly.

Gisele said "Thank you Merlin. Many people like me are suffering at Mboki, they cannot travel to Obo due to the transport fees and insecurity.....if Merlin can support Mboki hospital their lives will be saved too."