



A mother prepares to bury her daughter who had died during the previous night after several days of vomiting and diarrhea. Without basic sanitation or treatment, easily preventable and treatable diseases quickly become killers, claiming the lives of the youngest and most vulnerable of Geti's IDP camp.

Just dying for the elections

GETI: Warming herself by the fire among the layers of pungent wood smoke hanging motionless in the air, 78 year old Avesi Madasi complains she did not sleep well the previous night.

"I suffered during the night, I am feeling tooth pain and some swelling in my foot."

At least, though, she is now safe for the time being and no longer alone.

The previous day, her 60 year old daughter, Mavia Nara, spent nine hours carrying her ageing mother on her back the 20km through bush and jungle from the village of Bavi to Geti in southern Ituri District, eastern Congo.

With a cousin, they took it in turns to bring Avesi to safety, and people. Four days earlier, fighting erupted in their village between the Ituri Peoples Resistance Force (FRPI) militia group and the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC).

In the panic and fear, Avesi was simply left behind as people took flight. Alone and resigned to her fate, she hid from the fighting in a banana plantation until her children returned.

It must have been a terrifying and uncertain time.

"Sometimes it is just not possible to take everyone. Sometimes even children are left behind. We could not carry her so we abandoned her," said Mavia, gesturing towards her mother in the pale light just before sunrise.

But it was not the first time they had run from the fighting. Mavia, her mother and thousands of others like them are perpetually on the move as sporadic fighting continues to flare up across the region with Congo's first democratic elections in over forty years just a matter of days away.

"When we ran from Tche for Komanda in November last year," says Mavia, "I was separated from my 6 year-old son, Adziba.

"We were frightened by so many gunshots and fled. I do not know what happened to him, maybe he died, or maybe some other people have taken care of him."

The population of Geti has ballooned over recent weeks. The influx of displaced people trying to

find safety from the fighting has now made Geti home to over 40,000 people.

But the sudden mass arrival of so many has led to a desperate and increasingly dangerous humanitarian situation as others continue to arrive, swelling the numbers already competing for space on the periphery of this once small town.

With many having spent weeks, and in some cases, months, surviving in the bush, too scared to come out, their health is diminished and compromised.

The risks of being forced to live in such a way, particularly for young children, are great.

Across on the eastern side of Geti, the sound of wailing punctuates the air. 10 month old baby Mapenzi, tiny and fragile, is cradled by her mother as she rocks slowly back and forth.

Emurasi Bolona's only child died during the previous night after three days of vomiting and diarrhea. It is a scene not uncommon in Geti.

Just a few hundred yards away, more people grieve. Across the dirt track snaking its way between the newly erected grass-thatched huts, another death. Nearby, another. The victims; all children under the age of 7.

Hugues Robert-Nicoud, technical supervisor from *Medecins sans Frontieres'* (MSF) emergency desk in Geneva, who have set up a vaccination centre in Geti in response to the emergency, says the situation is so desperate due to the neglect of the healthcare system.

"There is a specific problem here," he says while walking among the makeshift homes on one of the hillsides overlooking Geti.

"The death rate is above threshold. At the moment it affects the most vulnerable, the under-fives, but if there is a cholera outbreak it will effect a much wider spectrum."

One of the main risks is that children who have specific acute malnutrition are more likely to succumb to malaria and other diseases, increasing the risk of death within a much shorter period.

"The symptoms of one disease can lead to the onset of another infection. It is a vicious circle,"

Robert-Nicoud says as the sound of continuous coughing from Geti's new inhabitants resonates from all directions.

"We need massive food distribution," he adds as a young mother and her six-month old baby are taken to be rushed to the MSF mission set-up to assist people and children suffering the effects of severe malnutrition.

"The situation is bad because people have been displaced and living in the bush for so long."

The global emergency threshold for under-five's is 2 deaths per 10,000 per day. Yet according to information from Geti's inhabitants, in just one small area of the camp, in one day, there were 18 fatalities.

This by no means is reflective of the entire camp, but the amount of freshly dug graves at the various cemeteries in and around Geti are indicative of the gravity of the humanitarian situation. At the town's health mission, a man lies motionless on a rusting and ageing bed. He has no such luxury as a mattress. Soldiers from the FARDC took them all when they looted the mission at the beginning of May. Instead he lies on dried grass spread across the rigid bed frame.

There is also no way the staff can confirm the meningitis he is suspected of suffering from. The Congolese soldiers also stole the microscope to carry out such a test. They also smashed the operating room, helped themselves to the light bulbs, the drugs, blankets, practically anything they could lay their hands on.

The FARDC soldiers suspected that mixed among the people when they first began arriving at the mission, were militias. Their response was to smash the Mission and take everything.

Among all of this, the central African country the size of Western Europe is bracing itself for elections. Yet for the people of Geti, the politics at play to determine who will become Congo's new president, are a very long way away.

The displacement and movement of so many people from the surrounding area also poses a problem for the electoral authorities.

"Our people are scattered in different places, the question is where are they going to vote," said Chief Akubi, the leader of the Lendu-Bindi, (Ngiti) people at a gathering at the town's football ground.

"The law leading the Electoral Commission said everyone will vote where they were registered."

But many people in Geti have either lost their cards or had them stolen or taken by force by FARDC or the militias. It costs US\$5 for a replacement, money that the majority of Geti's new inhabitants do not have.

"Everybody should go to the places where they voted for the referendum and vote. We should pray for the election to take place and we should vote for the right person in our collectivity, a responsible person, who will be able to speak on our behalf. Our security is critical," the Chief added.

But not only do the logistics of the thousands of displaced people voting in Geti, pose serious problems, but the threat of disruption from the militia on or just before 30 July is also very real. With a minimum presence of FARDC soldiers guarding the camp, it would be very easy to scatter the people with an attack that would, once again, see them flee into the bush. And if this were to happen, then there would be no election in Geti.

"If you are militia and you are here and you are hearing me, I ask you to go and respond to DDR" [Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme] Chief Akubi appealed to his people. "There are some militias planning to kill IDPs, people who are victims of no reason. I'm telling you because of innocent blood, God will meet you."

He asked that if someone knew their neighbour, friend or relative was a militia or keeping a gun, they should inform the authorities. "I know that they are many here among you. God knows them."

Hanging around the main market area in the centre of Geti, 15 year old Ausi Adhaba from Chekele says her father died and her elder brother had simply disappeared. "I do not know where he is, maybe he joined the militia or maybe he was forced to join."

Ausi and her two younger brothers spent three months in the bush fearing the fighting before they arrived in Geti. They are dependent on food given to them by people they knew from Chekele who they now live next too in the camp.

"The ones who are assisting us are our neighbours from Chekele who are also here. We have food in our garden in our home village, but we cannot go back. It is not safe."

Speaking at a campaign rally in Ituri's provincial capital Bunia in early July, transitional president and presidential candidate Joseph Kabila told the people of Ituri that Congo had been in war and division. "I say this is the time for peace in Ituri, not fighting,"

Kabila also stated the Congolese people had been through a very long and painful transition. "It is not today but after the elections we will certainly have peace, we will certainly have stability."

For the people of Geti and the surrounding area, both the elections and peace and stability must for the moment seem a very long way away.

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