



## **BANBATT's doctors provide medical care in Man**

*The crisis that broke out in Côte d'Ivoire on 19 September 2002 has affected all sectors of activity, not least public health. In the western part of the country, some of the 700 Bangladeshi Blue Helmets stationed in Man, which is under the control of the Forces Nouvelles, have been providing medical care to the residents of the town and neighbouring villages.*

On the Thursday morning that ONUCI visited the Banbatt-3 Hospital in Man, people had started trooping in since six a.m. Some had walked six, even 10 kilometres to get there. Women and girls were in one line, men and boys in another. Clutching a slip of white paper bearing a number in their hands, they waited patiently for the consultations to begin. The terrace, with its two tables and chairs, functioned as the office. In one corner, injured people lay on a hospital cot covered with a red cloth, waiting for their injuries to be tended to.

The consultations began at 0700 hours. Each patient handed over his or her white slip and then spoke to the doctor through his interpreter. "There is a real communication problem," said Major Shaukat Hassan, a doctor at the Banbatt Hospital in Man, "because we do not speak French or Yacouba, the local language."

That was no obstacle for Françoise Gnateu, who said she took her two-year-old to the Banbatt Hospital because her condition had not improved after many visits to the local general hospital. "Language communication is not the most important thing," she said. "The essential thing is to make yourself understood, if necessary through signs."

Just a year before, the people in the area had no idea that the Blue Helmets treated anybody but members of their own contingent. Justin Momie, who said he was on holiday from his high school in Divo, about 375 km from Man, recalled his astonishment when he learnt that a hospital had been set up in the Banbatt camp. "In my mind, the Blue Helmets were just there to keep people apart," he explained. "I was pleasantly surprised to know that they are also capable of healing us."

News about the medical care provided by the Bangladeshis is spread by word of mouth. "My four brothers were treated here and they strongly recommended this hospital. I've been coming here since then," said Justin. "I fell ill the day after I arrived here and my mother advised me to come here to be treated," he said. "I've heard only good things about this hospital and already, I feel cured thanks to the way we are received here."

The warm welcome and free treatment have contributed to the success of the Banbatt hospital, although doctors there said they would have liked to be able to spend more time with their patients. There was an ever increasing number of patients, so the only way to look after everyone was to do the consultations quickly, Major Mizan said regretfully. “There are so many of them that we cannot devote much time to each patient, which is really a pity,” he explained.

Still, Melanie Kla Fa swore by the “Banbatts” and their prescriptions. The baby she carries in her arms seemed to be in pretty bad shape. “She’s been coughing for a whole week now,” Melanie said. “I was obliged to wait until today to bring her here.” She explained that she would remain “faithful” to the clinic because when she developed a mysterious stomach ache some time before, the other hospitals had been unable to cure it. After a two-week treatment at the Banbatt clinic the stomach ailment disappeared. “They are very good, and what surprises me the most is the number of drugs: they give you so few of them that, in the beginning, you doubt whether the treatment will work. Only four little tablets made the difference,” she said.

At 10.30, it was time for a snack. Two soldiers offered the patients biscuits and cold water. “They come from so far and they wake up so early so as to be among the first to reach here,” one of the soldiers said, “so we give each one four biscuits and some water.”

Old Tia Bonbadé, who was blind, found it hard to contain his emotion. Furtively wiping a tear from his eye, he said: “They look after us so well, as if we were their brothers, whereas we do not have the same skin colour. They come from so far to do good for us, I can only thank them,” said the old man who was supported by his daughter. He had fairly strong hopes that before the Bangladeshis went back home he would regain his sight. “May they stay as long as possible to continue to help us free of cost,” he said.

The drugs were, in fact, provided free of charge. Doctors generally asked their patients to return after a week to see how the treatment has been working. “We really cannot ask them to pay for the consultations,” said Major Shaukat. “We saw the misery of the people in the villages and towns so we decided to help them, and we’ll do so to the end.”

People hoped the ever increasing number of patients was going to make the doctors hold consultations twice a week. Mothers, for their part, hope that the hospital would start vaccination sessions for their babies.

However, despite his goodwill, Major Shaukat Hassan was unable to satisfy this hope. “Nothing will change with regard to what we do,” he said. “Unfortunately, it’s impossible to do more...”



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