Conditions Deteriorate for Thousands Displaced by Violence in Central African Republic; IRC Launches Emergency Relief Effort

Bangui, CAR - 30 Jan 2007 - Violence, disease and malnutrition are threatening the lives of tens of thousands of uprooted people in northwestern Central African Republic, prompting the International Rescue Committee to launch an emergency relief effort to address their most critical needs.

"An already dire situation is getting worse every day," says Bob Kitchen, who is leading the IRC mission. "This has reached the level of a humanitarian disaster."

Civilians are caught in the middle of a conflict that pits soldiers against a rebel group trying to overthrow the government. People in the northwest say they have no one to trust and nowhere to turn for help. Villages are being raided, looted and burned, civilians are being slaughtered and survivors are fleeing into the bush for safety. There, they are living out in the open without shelter or protection and next to no food, clean water, health services and basic supplies.

Farming in this breadbasket region has become too risky, so food production has ground to a halt. Malnutrition rates are soaring and people are succumbing to preventable and treatable diseases. For those who remain in villages in this already destitute area, the violence only worsens their poverty.

Some 150,000 people are said to be internally displaced by the crisis and tens of thousands of others have fled to neighboring Chad and Cameroon.

An IRC emergency team is on the ground in the Central African Republic and is set to begin a humanitarian aid operation in and around the town of Kaga Bandoro in violence-torn Nana-Gribizi Prefecture. A recent assessment there found 54 charred and emptied villages along a 42 kilometer stretch of road. The inhabitants of the ruined villages, approximately 20,000 people, were hiding out in nearby forest.

"They all had to flee quickly, so they've lost everything," says Kitchen. "Most of them are drinking dirty water and are sick, but all clinics along the route were looted and shut down."

Kitchen says the only option for those who need medical attention is to travel to Kaga Bandoro Hospital, which lacks resources, equipment and enough medical staff to provide health care for the region. The facility is forced to charge for services and very few individuals can afford the fees.

In the coming weeks, the IRC will begin programs in coordination with the local health system aimed at improving, reviving and expanding health care services and making them more affordable for some 50,000 residents of the area. The emergency team will also begin constructing wells to increase access to clean water and distributing hygiene and other needed supplies including blankets and containers for water. The IRC plans to phase in special assistance for vulnerable children and women.

Source

In Central African Republic, Thousands of Displaced are Desperate for Help

By Melissa Winkler
Kaga Bandoro, CAR - 12 Feb 2007 - Francoise and six of her children were inside their thatch-roofed shack in the hamlet of Nguwaka seeking relief from the relentless afternoon sun when they heard gunshots. People from the village started screaming and running. Terrified, Francoise ordered her children to flee as fast as possible into the fields. She took hold of her smallest child and did the same.
The gunshots continued and everyone scattered. It was several hours later that Francoise found family members and learned that two of her boys, ages 9 and 10, had been shot and killed by the attacking soldiers. In the distance she could see her village in flames. “Since September the soldiers are attacking and burning our villages because they say we hide and help the rebels, but it isn’t true,” Francoise told an International Rescue Committee emergency team launching humanitarian relief efforts in the area. “My boys were so little,” she said. “They didn’t know anything of the troubles between rebels and soldiers.” It’s hard to find anyone from the Central African Republic’s volatile northern district of Nana Gribizi who agrees on the nature of “the troubles.” What is crystal clear is that months of clashes between insurgents and soldiers and targeted attacks on villages have uprooted thousands of families who are in desperate need of aid and security.

On the once densely-populated 48 kilometer stretch of road that links the region’s capital, Kaga Bandoro, to the market town of Ouandago, village after village has been looted and abandoned and the majority of them have been razed.

IRC aid workers preparing to distribute emergency supplies to displaced families drive slowly on this rough road so as not to cause alarm or be confused with rapid moving army vehicles. The tips of rifles and the curious eyes of young rebels peak out from behind the charred remains of brick dwellings to inspect passersby.

Nearly all of the area’s residents are in the dense bush and out of sight. Narrow paths lead to makeshift settlements one to six kilometers behind their ruined villages. The uprooted have constructed crude shelters with sticks and straw. They have little protection from the elements and none from prowling combatants. Most of their belongings were left behind when they fled and were either stolen or burned.

From time to time, women and girls venture out to the road to collect water from still-functioning taps. Francoise explained to the IRC that it’s far too dangerous for the men to do so. “The soldiers accuse the men of being rebels and the boys of spying for them,” she said.

More often than not, the displaced from Nguwaka stay in the bush and use a small stagnant pool of water nearby for drinking and washing. “It’s no wonder that everyone from the village is sick,” says Sam Gonzaga, an IRC water and sanitation expert who inspected the murky liquid that the villagers consume. “Diarrhea, malaria, infected wounds...” Ngodi Seraphin, a 31-year old father of five, ticks off a few of the ailments that people in Nguwaka are suffering. He told Sam that that the two clinics along the road were attacked a few months ago and are now empty. “We have no where to go for help when we are sick,” he said.

Sam has started working with the residents of Nguwaka and other villages to dig shallow wells in the fields. "Until people can return home to rebuild, it’s their safest option for collecting clean drinking water."

Sam and the IRC team are also organizing the delivery of blankets, mosquito nets, cooking sets, water containers, plastic sheeting and other emergency supplies to some 20,000 people in the area displaced by the violence.

In the meantime, IRC medical staff members dispatched to Kaga Bandoro are working with local health authorities to improve and expand health services to ensure that the most needy can get treatment.

Source