

# Disease claims young victims in Ivory Coast crisis

April 22 2011, By MICHELLE FAUL , Associated Press

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People injured during recent fighting await treatment at a clinic in the city of Abidjan, Ivory Coast, Wednesday, April 20, 2011. Nine days after former President Laurent Gbagbo was captured, his die-hard forces were still battling troops of Ivory Coast's democratically elected president on Wednesday in an Abidjan neighborhood, leaving civilians in the crossfire. (AP Photo/Emanuel Ekra)

(AP) -- Kneeling family members bent in prayer over two little bodies wrapped in sheets on the grass in the hospital grounds. Then two women among them released heart-rending wails.

The latest victims of Ivory Coast's bloody four-month political standoff are dying of easily treated malaria. Most are children.

"We had five patients die (of malaria) within an hour of reaching the

hospital yesterday," said Caroline Seguin, a nurse from Doctors Without Borders who is running the sole functioning hospital in Abidjan, Ivory Coast's biggest city of some 5 million people.

"They couldn't reach us because of the fighting and, by the time they got here, it was too late," she said.

Amid the death, there is life. Because it's the only available hospital, 65 babies were born at Abobo Sud Hospital during just one day this week - six times the usual number.

The wails coming from the maternity ward are ones of birthing pains that soon, hopefully, will give way to joy.

Many babies are being born prematurely to women who say they are traumatized and have gone into early labor. [Premature babies](#) have been born at the hospital, in churches and schools where people forced from their homes have gathered, some out in the open air.

The Abobo suburb of Abidjan, where the hospital is, has seen some of the city's worst fighting in recent months as soldiers loyal to strongman Laurent Gbagbo fired heavy artillery into the poor neighborhood.

Democratically elected President Alassane Ouattara met Friday with top generals and announced he was ordering all soldiers back to their barracks and that police and paramilitary police would take care of security. However, one notable non-attendee at the meeting was renegade warlord Ibrahim "IB" Coulibaly, who began the battle against Gbagbo's troops in Abobo.

In the past month, the 12-bed hospital in the suburb has treated 500 people wounded by shells, gunshots and grenades.

One such patient, Moussa Kone, 12, sat in the annex to the maternity ward, on a table covered with a blanket that served as his bed. A bandage covered the wound where doctors had to amputate his right leg above the knee.

When gunshots and explosions erupted around the military camp at Anyama village, where Moussa lives with his sisters, the boy's curiosity got the better of him. He and his friends wandered out to see what all the fuss was about. Before they reached the camp, a shell hit their group, killing two boys and injuring Moussa.

"We took him to the local clinic, but they didn't even have pain medicine. They just bandaged the leg," said his sister, Kouridya Ferrandine Doumbia.

"Then there was fighting around our village," she said. "When we tried to come to the hospital, there fighting in town on the way. By the time we got here, the wound was so infected they had to cut off his leg."

She said her brother was devastated because he loved sports and was a great soccer player. The boy's face lit up and a gummy grin broke out when a reporter told him about an entire team of soccer players in Liberia who lost limbs during that country's civil war but were fitted with prostheses and now travel abroad to play in international competitions.

"I'll start a team right here in Ivory Coast!" he declared.

Half of the 120 patients in the overcrowded hospital have had orthopedic surgery, said Seguin, the nurse, with dozens of amputations because of infections and gangrene.

"There are no other hospitals operating in the city and the fighting

prevented many people from getting here," she said.

At the same time, she said, it meant that Doctors Without Borders could not take their ambulance out to collect patients, despite receiving many desperate calls.

It's not known how many people were killed outright during the bloody standoff sparked by Gbagbo's refusal to accept his Nov. 28 election defeat. During his last stand in Abidjan, his soldiers, militiamen and hired mercenaries fired mortars and rockets at civilians. Gbagbo was arrested April 11.

The International Federation of the Red Cross says thousands have been killed and wounded.

Fighting continued in isolated pockets this week, further endangering civilians.

In Abidjan's sprawling northern suburb of Yopougon, shells and rockets exploded and gunfire erupted frequently this week as the former rebel forces that helped install Ouattara battled against die-hard militiamen who supported Gbagbo.

In Abobo suburb, Ivory Coast's new army turned its guns on a former ally Wednesday but retreated when they faced fierce resistance. There were no reports of fighting there Friday.

Infighting between forces loyal to Ouattara also erupted Wednesday in the southwestern cocoa port of San Pedro, where one group of soldiers tried to stop another from looting. U.N. peacekeepers stopped the combat after the fighters started launching mortars and rockets in downtown San Pedro.

It's not known how many more deaths and mutilations will come about as collateral damage from the fighting - like the children dying of malaria at the hospital in Abobo.

More than a million people fled during the battle for Abidjan, the West African nation's commercial capital. Another million people are displaced inside the country or ran away to neighboring states.

Tens of thousands are sleeping in the open, in tropical rainy weather that is the breeding season for malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

Mountains of trash have accumulated, adding to health concerns.

Water shortages have forced many to drink contaminated water, making them ill. There are fears of a cholera epidemic.

And on Thursday, the World Health Organization reported an outbreak of wild poliovirus type 3, with three new cases reported in January and February and accompanied by the onset of paralysis.

Mayhem in Ivory Coast prevented health workers from carrying out polio immunizations in late March.

"While the Ivorian political crisis seems to be nearing an end, the humanitarian crisis it generated will not disappear overnight," Momodou Lamin Fye, regional representative for the International Federation for the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, warned this week in an appeal for money to help in their work.

He said hundreds of thousands "still face enormous challenges to survive" amid soaring prices for food and essential items like medicine that are in short supply.

The Red Cross has received only a fraction of the \$4.3 million it requested to continue its work in [Ivory Coast](#), Lamin Fye said.

Seguin said Doctors Without Borders has survived many crises since it took over the Abobo hospital in February. The worst was a shortage of blood.

"For a while, we were taking blood from family members for transfusion," she said. "But we nearly ran out of the sachets that we use to collect the blood."

In another sign that the worst appears to be over, she said they were able to reach the plentiful supply of blood at the national bank on Tuesday.

The precarious security situation was underlined when a stray bullet sliced past the hand of a cook at the hospital this week, she said, touching but not wounding the woman. It was the third such bullet to find its way into the hospital.

The organization's 15 doctors and surgeons are working with Ivorian staff under great difficulty. Many have fled the city, but staff from other hospitals have come to lend a hand, and are paid by Doctors Without Borders, Seguin said. All the staff sleep at the hospital.

The French organization has brought in medication from its stocks in Bordeaux, flying them to neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso and then carrying them in by truck before the airport reopened last week, said Seguin, who also helped with logistics. They also brought in a generator to ensure electricity during medical operations, and a tank to hold water as the city continues to suffer frequent power and water cuts.

This week, the Ivorian Red Cross sent teams to empty the hospital morgue, which was crowded with bodies.

But even as the cleanup continues - residents this week were seen burning bodies along with trash - more are dying.

As a reporter left Abobo Sud Hospital, a wailing woman followed two men hefting a small load in a canvas sheet. Another child had died of malaria and reached the hospital too late for help.

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Citation: Disease claims young victims in Ivory Coast crisis (2011, April 22) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-04-disease-young-victims-ivory-coast.html>

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