

News from Cameroon – 17 July 2018

Manyemen Hospital resumes partial operation following its closure

Manyemen Hospital was one of the many facilities impacted by the unrest in Cameroon. The hospital was closed for almost a month and its staff took flight in the wake of a shoot-out on its site at the end of May 2018. Operation was resumed just over a month later, at least on a reduced scale. In this interview, Martin Witmer provides some information about the situation.

Martin Witmer, you were working on the ground for Mission 21 in Manyemen, and you are in regular contact with people in the affected region. What led to the closure of Manyemen Hospital in June?

The army carried out a raid, claiming that rebels had gone into hiding on the hospital premises. Army units drove onto the site, firing at random in all directions; they destroyed the water tank, and the workforce took flight. Even so, it seems that nobody was killed or injured during the incident. The village of Manyemen was also abandoned and about 2,000 inhabitants fled into the bush. After that, Manyemen was closed in June.

As an international co-worker, you've played your part in supporting Manyemen Hospital by helping to maintain it over a period of many years. How difficult was the hospital's closure for the population?

It really was very difficult indeed. This is a hospital in the countryside – it's the only facility that provides basic medical care within a wide radius. Antenatal preparation is offered here, the HIV programme is carried out here, and this is also where patients with HIV can find treatment.

Some of the staff resumed operations in Manyemen at the end of June. Is that a sign of hope?

About a third of the employees have returned to work. They include one doctor, the pharmacist and several nurses. Actually, this is a small sign of hope because it shows that people are trying to take back control of their lives. Agricultural work is hampered, but things are starting to happen in the hospital.

Generally speaking, what is the situation like for the population in the two English-speaking provinces?

The population is suffering severely due to the conflict between the separatists and the government. When I left Cameroon in January 2018, the situation was already tense; time after time, people were being killed during attacks by separatists or government troops. The violence has continued to escalate since then, and many villages have been destroyed. The total of displaced people is probably about 160,000. The UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) has registered 21,400 refugees from Cameroon in Nigeria, the neighbouring country – but real figure is likely to be 40,000 above that number.

In practical terms, what does that mean for the people?

Many of them have fled into the rainforest or the bushlands. There are no refugee camps in Cameroon itself. The situation has become difficult as regards health since the rainy season started in July. Everything is swampy and wet, and the risk of infection is growing: women (especially if they are pregnant) and children are in the greatest danger. It's much harder to make your way through the primeval forest. For all these reasons, it's very important that Manyemen is now open again on a partial basis. It has also become a place of refuge for some of those who have fled – they are staying on the site.

Mission 21 has set up an emergency relief programme for the population. How important is emergency relief in this situation?

Sad to say, the conditions in Cameroon now resemble civil war. The government troops are confronting three different separatist combat units. The refugees are mainly to be found in the rainforest and the bushlands, where they have no accommodation or protection. This is why it is so important to supply the people affected with the key essentials: food, medical assistance and tents. Teams that have access to the improvised camps in the forest are able to reach the refugees. At a later stage, they should also be given support so that they can build their own housing again, and so that they can sow cereals and vegetables; that will enable them to provide for their own needs once more.

Interview: Christoph Rácz