



MSF Diary (experience from the field) August 2009

First mission experience with MSF: I remember that very day. It was 3rd January 2005. I was working with OXFAM in a Tsunami response project at Nagercoil in Tamilnadu, South India. I was busy working in the field in a small village named Kolachal. Suddenly a white car stopped by and two ladies, I still remember their names – Carol and Elena- wearing MSF T-shirts approached me and introduced themselves. We had a friendly discussion on the ongoing activities carried out by different NGOs post tsunami. In turn, the women briefed me about MSF which generated my interest in the organisation. That evening I looked up the MSF website and came to know that MSF is a politically neutral, humanitarian organization, well known not only for its work on the field but also for temoignage: witness and advocacy! It doesn't discriminate on the basis of caste, creed, sex or color and works in places of natural or man-made disasters. Reading all this I felt now, I had enough reasons to work with them. After completing my assignment with Oxfam, I applied to MSF. I was invited to attend an interview and thus I became part of the MSF family.

I attended the PPD training in November 2007 in UK. It was very exciting with 30 volunteers from different parts of the world attending the course. We are made familiar with the different aspects of MSF - its evolution, values, principles, charters, areas of expertise, mode of operation, operational areas, and roles of a volunteer and experience of volunteers from the field. – in all, a wonderful experience for me. I returned home from PPD with great hope and expectations regarding my first mission. But the next six months, it was only "wait", "wait" and "wait" for a call from Delhi – MSF recruitment office, as the days passed by the dream of working with MSF started fading out.

On the 14th of May, I got a call from ACTED, Delhi for the confirmation of my selection as a senior watsan specialist in their organization. I requested them two days to confirm my response, though by now I lost all hopes of working with MSF. But God was in action, for that very evening I got a call from MSF, Delhi to know my availability for a mission in Uganda. Without any hesitation I told them "YES".

Since it was my first assignment overseas, I was a bit anxious, wondering whether I would be able to meet expectations of the organization especially in circumstances where every thing would be new to me – people, their culture, way of life, food habit, language, weather , ... every thing. But I accepted the challenge.

I arrived at Kampala on the 26th May. After a short briefing at Kampala office by Head of Mission, Logistics coordinator and Financial coordinator I arrived at Kitgum 2 days later. The team consisted of 7 expatriate members: a Project Coordinator from Kenya, a logistician from Zambia, two medical doctors, each from Holland and Norway, another watsan specialist from UK and a nurse each from Holland and Germany. Out of 7 expatriates two – one medical doctor and one watsan specialist were specially deputed for Hepatitis E intervention. Kitgum office was the base of the operation of two projects - Hepatitis E and MSF's regular programme on HIV/AIDS and operational support for the health center at Madi Opei.

Once in Kitgum, I was briefed on project activities and security guidelines and preceded onwards to Mudi Opei. The MSF flag on the vehicle was flapping in the wind. I was a little inattentive and also was anxiously thinking of my coming days in the project. Suddenly I heard the voice of the driver over radio phone.

"Bock base Bock base at Hug 10"

"Hug 10 go ahead"

"We are departing from bock base to Yanky four.... over"

"Affirmative"

"Kilometer 00 and 1 pax on board. Next contact after 30 mikes.

Over and out"

"Safe journey"

This was the beginning. Every time I traveled within the project area it was common practice to keep in contact with the base through radio. I was very thrilled and excited. Though the security staff appraised me earlier, it was a wonderful experience and I was thoroughly enjoying it. It was a sunny day with clear skies and greenery all around.

Only some NGO cars and cycles plied the muddy road. After an hour's drive I arrived at Mudi Opei. I was welcomed by staff. After a small introduction session, I went to Patika IDP camp to meet Mat (Mathew Arnold), watsan expatriate, who I would replace. That day soap and jerrycan distribution was going on in the camps. Thousands of people were in queue to receive our assistance. As usual there was confusion and complaining, but at the end, all was well. Mat received me well and after introductions, I spent some time with Mat and moved around to see MSF's intervention in the area. That evening Mat briefed me about the project – its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, challenges, strategies, work progress and future plans.

Except the PC and the logistician, all other expatriate staff stayed at the Mudi Opei during the week. The Mudi Opei compound was fairly big with 20 tukuls, a kitchen, a drawing cum dining place and a storeroom. For water, we depended on a water carrier to fetch water from an adjacent village. Though the type of latrine (pit latrine - no need to use water!) was not my choice, I accepted it sportingly. There was no electricity in the compound and solar panels helped us to get our laptops and mobiles going. In the evening we spent time playing games, gossiping and yes, star gazing (thanks to Aslak – the medical doctor for his powerful binocular). I tried a variety of foods – Posho (cooked maize flour), bean curry, mashed potato, ground nut paste, dried fish curry, boiled cabbages, noodles, low spicy meat/chicken, boiled green leafs and rice. It was fun; different people, different food habit, different tastes...! I managed to habituate myself to the MSF life.

Work was a bit hectic with increasing number of Hepatitis E cases. The work was challenging and every thing was new to me. Since it was my first mission, I hardly had any experience with MSF's modus operandi, strategies, principles and values (yes, I did get some idea/input during PPD and briefing). I wondered how I will be received by people with different attitudes and cultures, by national staff, by Govt. staff, by other NGOs, plus, there were also the security concerns. Being deployed in an emergency, I needed to learn fast. I quickly built up a good rapport with people, during my four months in the project. MSF's intervention regarding Hepatitis E was mainly to contribute in promotion of clean health conditions in the camp areas by providing water and sanitation facilities *** (please see below) and to support health centers with essential drugs and manpower.

We spent the weekends at Kitgum with very good accommodation and better relaxation waiting for us. I then used to make "Chapati" and "Dum Aloo" – everyone liked the combo, over candlelight. Roaming and spend some time at Kitgum market was a common pastime. I enjoyed the trip to Murchison falls and the safari, too.

MSF's effort to combat Hepatitis E was well appreciated both locally and nationally. It is satisfying for me that Hepatitis E cases were reduced by more than 50% during my tenure. Local people seemed happy and friendly and I enjoyed a lot in working with the expatriates, national staff, Govt. staff and other acquaintances.

Four months passed by, and soon, it was time to leave. National staff arranged a perfect farewell party for me where Staff of MoH, friends of other NGOs, my expatriate friends and all national staff were present. On 20th September, all my expatriate friends bid me goodbye. We hugged each other, tears in our eyes and I slowly moved to the car in pin-drop silence, no words were necessary.

The car started.

"Bock base bock base hug 15 we are departing from bock base to mike base.... Kilomike 00, 1 pax in board... next contact after 30 mites".

We moved on

With pain in my heart and a sense of emptiness, I whispered to my project, "GOOD BYE"!

*** MSF's activities on watsan: a) Construction of latrines. b) Distribution of hygiene materials. c) Providing hand washing facility d) Rehabilitation of boreholes and soak pist. e) Construction of bore hole fencing. f) Providing facility for provision of safe water. g) Providing sanitation facilities to the health centers. h) Health education to the camp people. i) Active case finding and referral services. j) Support health centers with essentials drugs and skilled hands and most importantly. k) Focusing on advocacy effort with different NGOs for need driven assistance to the camp dwellers.



AJOY BHATTACHARYYA, Water and Sanitation Specialist: Mission in Kitgum district, Uganda, August 2009.

Indian expats working as volunteers with MSF in 2009

- Ajoy Bhattacharyya (Water and Sanitation Specialist) – Uganda, Bangladesh
- Ambrose Toppo (Financial Coordinator) – Uganda, Uzbekistan
- Anil Kumar Bhola (Epidemiologist)– Mozambique
- Arif Uddin Kazi (Physician – TB) – Uzbekistan, Uganda
- Ashok Shrirang Sankpal (Physician) - South Sudan
- Aurangzeb Sulehry (Logistician) - Sierra Leone
- Baljit Singh Bajwa (Anaesthesiologist) - Yemen
- Chandrika Rao Raghavendra (General Surgeon) - South Sudan
- Chanjiv Singh Mehta (Plastic Surgeon) – Iraq, Gaza
- Clair Deguernel (Financial Coordinator) – Nepal
- Dilip Kumar Bhaskaran (Logistician) - DRC
- Gautam Chatterjee (Country Manager / HR) – Ethiopia, Nigeria
- Imtiaz Wadud (Logistician) – South Sudan
- Jui Shankar (Mental Health Specialist) – PNG
- Mukaddas Yakubova (Medical Officer TB) – Russia
- Navjot Singh (Surgeon – Orthopaedics)- Nigeria
- Nilza Angmo (Obstetrician/Gynaecologist) - Armenia
- Nitya Uday Raj (Physician)- Somalia
- Ranjith Thekke Cherupilly (Surgeon – Orthopaedics) - Nigeria
- Renita Lourdhurajan (Infection Diseases – MD) – Kenya
- Sabrina Sharmin (Physician - MPH) - South Sudan
- Sahiddul Islam (Physician) - South Sudan
- Saswata Dutt (Physician – HIV) – Swaziland
- Shanti Hegde (Obstetrician/Gynaecologist) - Nepal
- Shobha Varthman (Anaesthesiologist) - PNG
- Stobdan Kalon (Country Manager / MD Specialist)- Armenia
- Vadivel Vasantha (Infection Control Specialist) - Iraq
- Vivek Mishra (Logistician) - South Africa
- Wint Thu Naing (Laboratory Scientist) – Ethiopia, Bangladesh



Dr. Sasawata Dutt, MSF mission in Swaziland