



Mission: South Sudan

Frontlines: South Sudan – not just another mission

MSF Volunteer: Ajoy Bhattacharya, Water and Sanitation Expert (Watsan)

Hello Ajoy, This is Farhat. How are you?

I am fine. Whats up?

Hmmm... are you interested in South Sudan? They need a water and sanitation expert in Malakal, for an emergency kala azar response.



Farhat is the overseas Recruitment Coordinator of MSF India. I didn't think twice, but said YES straight away. I was longing to work in South Sudan. I had heard a lot about the country, that the people are very nice and cooperative, and that working in South Sudan is always a challenge. A new environment, new people and a new culture, I was excited. It was a Friday evening in early December 2010. Now was the time to move on again. After the weekend I started to pack. The flight was on Wednesday. The schedule was to be briefed in the Delhi office of MSF India that evening, then fly to Nairobi early the next morning. It was Qatar airways, with a one-stop journey to Nairobi via Doha.

When I reached the Delhi office the HR briefed me about the project and the DO'S and DON'TS. I collected the documents from the office and reached Delhi airport. The flight was in the early morning, at 4.40 am. I did face some hassle convincing the official at the check-in counter about the purpose of journey. Thanks, Farhat, for providing me with an official letter showing clearly WHO I AM, WHERE I AM GOING AND WHY. The journey was smooth and comfortable. I watched two movies – "Dabang" starring Salman Khan and "Three Idiots" starring Amir Khan. I arrived in Nairobi at noon after a nine-hour journey from Delhi. I purchased a single entry visa from the airport and was met by Vincent, wearing an MSF T-shirt, who greeted me and took me to the guesthouse. It was a nice guesthouse with lots of greenery around it. The weather was cool, with the temperature just 18 degrees Celsius. I felt at home. My onward flight to Lokichokio (also known as "Loki") was not till the next morning.

The next morning, the MSF driver greeted me at the guesthouse, handed over my South Sudan travel pass, and took me to Wilson airport, destination Loki. It was a small 20-seater aircraft, with some seats vacant. It took an hour-and-a-half to reach Loki, a very small town near the South Sudan border. The infrastructure in the airport is very basic. An MSF driver greeted me and took me to the office. Loki is the logistics base of MSF and also the base for travelling between South Sudan and Kenya. I was introduced to other MSF colleagues and to my watsan mate, a big man with a permanent smile. The compound was very big, being the stop-over

for both in-pats (MSF staff recruited from elsewhere in South Sudan) and expats (international staff). There is a sky bar in the compound, a nice place to sit and relax with some drinks and spend time. As the name implies, the sky bar is an elevated wooden balcony; small hills all around, a soothing relaxation of eyes. The Loki market is very small, though the basic needs of daily life are available. Some good bars cum restaurants are available in the town, one of which is 748. Pilots and international staff prefer 748. No doubt it is a good place, and the first time I went there I was amazed to see the infrastructure. It is really big,



with the facility to play pool, there is a big screen for watching football, and there are drinks and beers. Loki was an important logistics base during the decades of civil war between the north and south of Sudan. After the peace agreement and the tense peace, planes can fly straight to the South Sudan capital, Juba, so Loki's importance dwindled and it became deserted. The town is very calm and quiet,

especially our compound; it is a good place to spend holidays. I spent four days there before continuing my journey to Juba.

The next Monday I flew to Juba, the capital of South Sudan. The flight was a small 10-seater UN aircraft, its passengers mostly from MSF. It took one-and-a-quarter hours to reach Juba. Juba is an international airport for the neighbouring countries, including Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya. After immigration clearance we came out of the airport. The MSF driver, wearing an MSF T-shirt, greeted us and took us to the house for international staff. Juba is the administrative base of the South Sudan mission. The Juba expat house is not too big; facilities are moderate, with individual rooms, dormitories, a dining space, kitchen and TV rooms. After freshening up and taking refreshments, we went to the Juba office. Juba is the base of the head of mission, along with the financial coordinator (FinCo), the human resources coordinator (HRCo), the medical coordinator (MedCo), the humanitarian affairs officer (HAO) and the deputy head of mission. I was briefed by the MedCo, the head of mission, and the FinCo. Since Watsan is part of the medical activities, my line manager was the MedCo, who briefed me on the details of my role and responsibilities, the objective for the post, the current Watsan needs, and the schedule of my visit for the next couple of weeks.

I spent nine months in the mission. My place of posting was Juba, but being the 'flying Watsan', my responsibility was to oversee the water and sanitation situation of all the projects.

MSF has two missions in South Sudan. South Sudan One was made up of the three projects at Lankien, Nasir and Leer, which focus on basic healthcare along with the treatment of tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and malnutrition. South Sudan Two was made up of Malakal – the base for the emergency response for kala azar patients – and Bentiu – the base of the emergency feeding programme.

All the MSF projects were in rural areas, where public transport is almost non-existent. The project locations were connected through flights only. The UN was the biggest flight operator in South Sudan

for humanitarian aid workers. As well as the UN flights, MSF and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have their own 12-seater aircraft. We travelled mostly on MSF flights and occasionally on UN flights. Except for Malakal, the entire rural runways were made of earth, and landing the plane depended on the weather and the condition of the soil. It was not uncommon to be stuck in a project location for weeks due to poor landing conditions. Sometimes it also happened that the flight scheduled to land at a particular project location was unable to land due to the state of the runway, and had to fly back to the base.

My 'flying watsan' position meant that I had to work in all the projects. Work was a bit hectic in the emergency projects as I had to respond immediately to the watsan needs. For regular projects, my main challenge was to keep the minimum watsan needs in place in our healthcare settings and facilitate the project team in solving the day-to-day watsan problems. Control of infection in the healthcare setting was one of my major responsibilities. It was very satisfactory for me that during my time in South Sudan, none of the projects suffered from any major incidence of waterborne diseases. Some sporadic incidences of hepatitis E were reported from Nasir, and some cholera cases from Leer and Lankien.

One of my biggest challenges was to monitor the uninterrupted supply of about 120,000 litres of water at the three projects to meet the needs of the hospital and the public. My 'flying' position did not allow me to stay in a particular project for any length of time. In that sense I was lucky in that I never had the chance to get bored by being stuck in a project for a long time. Every time I visited a project I gained new experiences, met new people, and became acquainted with their culture and eating habits.

Spending the weekend was different in different projects. Fishing in the Sobat river and enjoying food in the Ethiopian restaurant was unique to the Nasir project. In Leer, on Sundays we used to go to the local restaurant to get typical Sudanese food. In Lankien, good restaurants were almost non-existent. We used to cook on Sundays, sometimes as per our choice and sometimes on demand. I used to make puris and fish curry – everyone liked them.

All the projects had good accommodation facilities, with enough space for everyone to have their own rooms – both *tukuls* (round huts with thatched roofs) and concrete buildings. We also used to enjoy our time at weekends by reading books, drinking beers, watching TV shows and DVDs, surfing the internet (we were lucky enough to have a high-speed internet connection at every project) and playing chess. Roaming around and spending time in the market was restricted for security reasons. We used to enjoy candlelit dinners in the compound, with or without a reason.

There was one day I won't forget: 3 March 2011. I was in Malakal. My plan was to catch the UN flight the next morning to Juba. Malakal was always a tense place due to the never-ending conflict between two tribes. In the early morning we all woke up to the sound of heavy gunfire in the nearby marketplace, just 50 metres from our compound. The project coordinator, who was responsible for our security, instructed us to go to the safe room. The heavy gunfire continued all day, with occasional pauses of an hour or two. We entered the safe room six times, and all 12 staff slept in the safe room that night. The safe room was just five metres by four metres, and it was difficult to accommodate all the staff. The gunfire continued for three more days, after which I was finally able to catch the UN flight to Juba.

Clashes between tribes are not uncommon in South Sudan. Cows are a central point of conflict for tribal clashes. People who own more cows are more wealthy and can marry more easily. At times, one tribe decides to grab the cows of the other tribe to increase their wealth. More than 40 years of war between North and South Sudan have left every family with guns. Due to the availability of arms, clashes between tribes have become more bloody and end with huge loss of life. The clashes between the Nuer and the Murle has been longstanding.

Another day I won't forget was 19 August 2011. Our project coordinator called an urgent meeting to tell us that the project would soon receive 34 patients wounded due to an attack by the Murle on the Nuer tribes in a town called Pieri. She told us that at

least 640 people had died, 861 people had been injured and 208 children had been kidnapped in an attack on Uror county, in the north of Jonglei state. Around 7,924 houses had also been set on fire and more than 38,000 heads of cattle stolen. The attack was understood to be a revenge operation against the Nuer tribe after an attack on the Murle last June in which many deaths were reported and cattle stolen. With 34 victims expected, and not enough space to accommodate them all, two big tents were erected in an open area within the hospital. Our only surgeon was on leave. Thankfully, a Red Cross team arrived from Malakal to help us out.

Despite these flaring up of serious violence, working in South Sudan as a flying watsan gave me immense pleasure and helped me to grow, both personally and professionally. Though it was my eighth mission with MSF, it was unique in being nine months' long and very different from the short emergency missions I had done. Working with MSF always gives me immense satisfaction, as does working amidst and for the people who are in need. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of my colleagues who made my mission such a grand success.

- Ajoy Bhattacharya, Watsan

MSF is urgently seeking for TB and Chest Specialists :

We are looking for Medical Doctors for our TB projects who are preferably experienced in programmatic approaches in either drug resistant TB treatment or HIV/TB treatment in resource limited settings, for infectious diseases specialists and for Medical doctors specialized in internal medicine/ respiratory medicine.

For more information :

please contact us at india-hrm@oca.msf.org .

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