

DRC: Armed Congolese soldiers enter MSF hospital in Hauts Plateaux, South Kivu, and remove wounded patients

MSF demands that all parties to the conflict respect medical structures

The medical humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) deplores a serious incident that happened in the isolated village of Katanga in the region of Hauts Plateaux, South Kivu. On Thursday 11th March, armed soldiers from the Congolese Army (FARDC - Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo) entered the hospital of Katanga, where an MSF surgical team had been providing emergency medical care to wounded people. Despite MSF's protests and negotiations, the Congolese soldiers, after harassing the wounded patients, left the hospital one day later with four of them.

"This incident is a violation of basic humanitarian principles; all sick and wounded have the right to medical care", says Philippe Havet, MSF Head of Mission in South Kivu, DRC. "We demand that all armed actors respect medical structures and the safety of wounded people and medical staff. Unarmed, wounded belligerents enjoy this protection as any other patient."

The incident has already a negative impact on the provision of health care to people affected by the conflict in Hauts-Plateaux. As tensions were rising in the village, MSF decided to evacuate its surgical team in order to preserve the security of its staff and had to leave one wounded patient behind. It was the only medical team providing direct medical care in the region. MSF will consider sending the surgical team back to Katanga hospital as soon as the security situation allows it. However, the incident will have a broader impact on the perception of the hospital as a safe and neutral place.

During the last weeks the MSF surgical team had been struggling to provide emergency surgical assistance to people wounded in the violent clashes that are raging in the region of Hauts Plateaux between the Congolese army (FARDC), FDLR rebels and various armed groups. "Wounded people were already afraid to come to the hospital of Katanga and seek help, in fear of being killed by armed men", says Havet. "Now, after this serious incident, I am afraid they will never be convinced that it is safe for them to seek any medical help."

MSF is currently providing medical care to displaced people in the village of Kihuha, in Hauts Plateaux. MSF teams are also working in Kalonge and Kitutu in South Kivu supporting health centres and operating mobile clinics for the provision of primary healthcare and emergency assistance to displaced people and host families. MSF is also supporting health centres, Baraka Hospital and a Cholera Treatment Centre in Fizi. In North Kivu, a province also affected by insecurity and violence, MSF runs medical programmes in Rutshuru, Nyanzale, Masisi, Mweso, and Kitchanga. 76 international staff are working alongside 1144 Congolese colleagues in MSF projects in North and South Kivu.