

Portland-area health care volunteers return from helping Congolese refugees

by Tom Hallman, The Oregonian

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Courtesy of Medical Teams International

Dr. Tom Martin, an emergency room doctor at Providence Portland Medical Center, cradles a child ill with malaria during a recent mission to help refugees from Congo. An ambulance was taking the child and others to a treatment center in a refugee camp in Uganda across the border from Congo. **Three Portland-area medical professionals who returned Saturday from a monthlong mission to help refugees from Congo are haunted by the suffering they saw.**

"We helped over 200 people a day," Dr. Tom Martin, who works in the emergency room at Providence Portland Medical Center, said this week. "They were so sick. Fevers over 105 degrees, some with wounds, some starving. And they just kept coming."

Martin joined Anne Blaufus, a Providence emergency room nurse, and Kathi McCoy, owner of the West Portland Physical Therapy Clinic, as Medical Teams International volunteers in a refugee camp across the border in Uganda. The Tigard-based humanitarian organization began its mission there in 2004.

How to help

Medical Teams International seeks donations to buy treated mosquito nets for beds in the refugee camp. Each net protects two people from malaria and costs \$8. To donate go to www.medicalteams.org.

Congo, in central Africa, has had internal struggles for decades as the government and tribal factions fight one another for control of natural resources. Civilians are caught in the middle of a conflict that has claimed more than 5 million lives.

Medical Teams International provides health care to people with nowhere else to turn. The group has a permanent staff in Uganda, and teams of U.S. volunteers rotate in every month or so. The camp is across the border because Congo is so dangerous.

Martin's team, arriving in December with more than \$30,000 in medical supplies, got right to work.

"There's a lot of sickness," Blaufus said. "You go in knowing that you can't fix the problem. You do the best you can."

McCoy said the situation is a "human rights catastrophe" that receives scant media attention. She has studied the situation for years, she said, and is angry that "global politics" allows battles to continue.

"When 45 people die in Gaza, it's on CNN all the time, and countries try

and intervene," she said. "In the Congo, 1,500 people die each day and nothing happens.

"I saw the face of God in the workers in the refugee camps," she said. "Some of these camps have 40,000 people living in them. They arrive with nothing. They get a tarp and little plot of land. That's it. That's how they live."

The team members used vacation time for the mission and plan to return.

"It's about a commitment to people," Martin said. "In that place, we're talking about the most basic of human existence. You can't begin to compare what we have in this country. It is a different universe. All we can try and do is make a difference one person at a time."

Some civilians, the team said, just wanted someone to talk with. Or they had ailments the team couldn't help with, such as cataracts or dental problems. Others were in critical condition.

"There were children who would have died had we not been there," Blaufus said. "Malaria there kills 1 million children a year under the age of 5."

Martin said malaria is easy to treat but impossible to control in Congo. Children have no immunity from the mosquito-transmitted disease, he said.

All three team members will soon return to their regular jobs. But Congo won't be far from their hearts.

"What a trip like this does is serve to remind me that people are the same everywhere," Martin said. "People in Portland or in the Congo have the same fears and anxieties. All people want is the chance to be safe and healthy."

McCoy came home with a vivid memory of a child who showed up near death.

"The malaria had gone to his brain," she said. "This child would have died

if not for Tom and the medicine he brought from Portland. Four hours later, the child was fine."

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