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## CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: Aid agencies suspend operations after killing

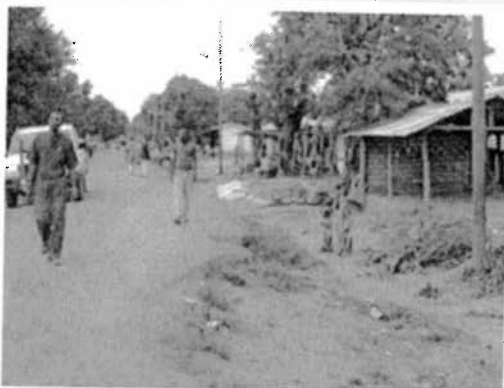


Photo: Joseph Benamasse/IRIN

A general view of Paoua, the town where Elsa Serfass was based

BANGUI, 12 June 2007 (IRIN) - The killing of a volunteer for Médecins Sans Frontières in northwestern Central African Republic (CAR) has compelled non-governmental organisations in the region to temporarily suspend operations, sources said.

Elsa Serfass, 27, was killed by gunfire during an assessment mission in northwestern CAR on 11 June. She was on her first assignment with MSF-France, working as a logistician in Paoua.

"After a 30 May rebel attack in the town of N'Gaoundal and the government's violent reprisals, MSF learned of the catastrophic health conditions in the area and decided to carry out an assessment," MSF said in a statement. "During that mission, our vehicle was hit by gunfire and Elsa was fatally injured."

Following the incident, MSF-France and other organisations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, temporarily suspended work around Paoua, sources in the CAR capital of Bangui said.

"The tragic death of Elsa Serfass is a terrible shock for MSF and we mourn her loss," the French charity noted. "Our thoughts are with her family and friends."

Sources in Bangui blamed the attack on the Armée populaire pour la restauration de la république et de la démocratie (APRD) rebels who are fighting government forces in the region. The rebels, opponents of President François Bozize, claim he overthrew a legitimate government in March 2003, has mismanaged public funds and divided the nation.

The insurgency has brought suffering to civilians in the region and illustrates the escalating insecurity over the five past years because of armed rebellion and the proliferation of armed bandits, called Zaraguinas.

According to MSF, the local population has been targeted by systematic violence, with many villages along the roadways attacked, pillaged and burned, forcing inhabitants to flee to survive in the bush.

In May, the Italian charity, Cooperazione Internazionale (COOPI), suspended activities in Bozoum, Ouham Pendé prefecture, after the abduction of two health workers. The NGO works in Bozoum, Bocaranga and Ngaoundai, which together have a population of 150,000-200,000.

According to the UN, nearly 300,000 people have fled their homes in the CAR over the past year because of violence.

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