Rebuilding war-ravaged Casamance

The guns may be silent in Casamance, but the legacy of two decades of a separatist war between the Senegalese government and the rebel Movement for the Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) is still haunting ordinary Casamancais. In addition to the trauma of being displaced and suffering the loss of killed relatives, refugees now returning to their shell-shattered communities following the signing of a peace agreement last December face the danger of landmines.

(24.05.2005)

As Momodou Diame, a returnee in Mpack village, close to the border with Guinea Bissau, explains: "Indeed we are grateful that now when we wake up in the morning, we don't hear the sounds of warring guns.

"But a lot of people here are also worried about landmines that were buried here during the civil war. Because of this we are afraid to venture into the bush to do farm work."

International agencies working in the region say they have difficulty obtaining the right information, especially from former rebels, on where the landmines are planted.

Awareness

Because of this, Handicap International, a charity based in Casamance, has started running campaigns to make local people aware of the dangers of landmines and how they can identify where landmines may have been planted.

More than 750 people have been registered as being disabled by landmines since the war began in 1982. Aid agencies are warning that unless urgent action is taken to start the process of de-mining, many more people are likely to be victims of landmines in Casamance.

In the meantime, people disabled by landmines are struggling to get on with their lives. Bakary Diedhou, president of the Victims of Landmines group, said his members have compelling needs that require urgent attention.

He said most victims lack access to specialist medical treatment and women widowed by landmines find it difficult to educate and feed their children.

The rainy season will soon start in Casamance and the returnees are worried that they will not be able to access their fields.

Aid agencies fear Casamancais may face food shortages, despite living in Senegal's most fertile region.

Shattered schools

Aside from landmines, educating the returning children is another challenge facing Casamance - a region cut off from the rest of Senegal by The Gambia.

Families coming back from neighbouring countries now face problems rehabilitating their children into the already overstretched school system, which suffered serious neglect in the heat of the conflict.

In addition to bullet-holes on buildings, it is common to see school buildings without roofs.

Inside the makeshift classrooms of Mpack primary school, pupils use pebbles, bottle tops and cowry shells as counting materials during arithmetic lessons.

Every 35 minutes, the school-bell master strikes a disused vehicle wheel-frame hanging on the walls of the administration block to signal the beginning or end of classes.

"As you can see some of our classes are without proper roofs so when the sun is hot, we have to keep moving from one end of the classroom to the other for shade," says Maxine Kamoune, the headmaster of Mpack primary school.

"The rainy season is just a few weeks away and it will be impossible to keep the children under this condition when it rains."

Memories

During the civil conflict, school buildings, hospitals and other community infrastructures were deliberately targeted by the fighting forces.

In addition, almost every family in the war zone has horrific stories and memories of the war, which according to education officials in the region impact negatively, especially on the children.

International aid agencies in Casamance are trying to train teachers to help traumatised pupils integrate and cope with everyday life in school.

Some of these pupils were either internally displaced or were refugees in neighbouring countries.

But despite the trauma, they know what they want.

During the interactive sessions, one of the pupils sitting at the far end of the classroom shouted: "I want to be a good footballer to help my parents." He was wearing the number eight jersey of Chelsea's Frank Lampard.

Although both former MFDC fighters and the government have committed themselves to bringing lasting peace to Casamance, the biggest challenge for them is to make good their pledges for positive change in the lives of the ordinary people of the region.


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