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Dear Supporters,

I'm just back from four months working as a 'flying watsan', or water and sanitation engineer, travelling between MSF projects in Central African Republic.

My first stop was Zemio, where MSF runs a hospital specialising in maternity care and HIV. The town is really beautiful – full of lush green trees taller than houses. I'm told it's the furthest point in Africa from any sea.

I spent my first day building an incinerator for the hospital – vital for improving the management of medical waste and preventing the spread of disease. I worked alongside a local MSF watsan called Bertrand. We made a good team because we had different skills that complemented each other: I have a civil engineering background, so I could calculate the number of bricks we needed, and he knew how to cement the bricks together to make the incinerator stand up!

Before testing the incinerator, we found one of the area's deadliest snakes nestled inside Bertrand's heavy-duty work gloves. Seeing five Central African men beating a glove with shovels and axes was quite a sight. It was a lucky escape for Bertrand as snakebites can be fatal in this part of the world.

A few days later, I headed to Bambari, in the south of the country. MSF has recently taken over management of the town's hospital, and I was there to help improve its water and sanitation. Lots of displaced people had recently arrived in the area and the hospital was incredibly busy, with people living in tents just outside the front doors.

In order to clean the hospital properly, the patients needed to move outside temporarily while we worked. When I saw a woman struggling to carry her child, my natural instinct was to rush over and help. The woman was incredibly weak – she could only have weighed around 45 kg. Her five-year-old daughter had been admitted to the



Francesca (second from right) with the team in Bambari, Central African Republic. Photograph © MSF

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hospital with acute malaria and was unconscious. I took the child in my arms and we walked outside together. I don't think there's a human being on earth who wouldn't have wanted to help.

Luckily, the little girl soon recovered with the help of MSF's brilliant medical team. With kids of that age, I'm always amazed at how close to death they seem when they arrive, and then barely a few days later they are up and about, laughing and playing in the hospital ward.

After leaving Bambari I headed to Bangui, the capital of Central African Republic, where I spent six sleepless nights on my penultimate stop before heading home. There had been a small cholera outbreak in a village just outside the city, which meant it was all hands on deck to respond.

Within days of the first confirmed cases, the MSF team had set up a cholera treatment centre. We worked for 15 hours a day, building the hospital from scratch in a field just outside Bangui. We woke up as soon as it was light, and we worked non-stop, under the blazing sun, until seven or eight in the evening. After just three days we had built the triage area, isolation unit and treatment centre, and kitted the hospital out with its own water supply, generator and electricity.

It was a dream project for a watsan like me; with cholera, good hygiene stops the disease from spreading, so even though I'm not a medic, I really felt like I was saving lives.

My last stop was in Bossangoa, in the northwest, where MSF is running a massive hospital with a big inpatient department and an even bigger children's ward. At any one time there are 250 inpatients and more malaria than I've ever seen.

I was there to help fix the drainage system in the hospital – a pretty unglamorous job, but someone's got to do it. If you don't have proper drainage systems in place, water from the hospital becomes stagnant and attracts mosquitoes, which can cause serious cases of malaria and other waterborne diseases. As an engineer, it was my job to figure out how to build the drains underground and what we would need to do it.

We worked in teams of three and four to build different parts of the drain. After a few days, I had dug and sweated so much that I was exhausted. But the new drainage system was up and running and my work was finally done!

So much had happened in the space of four short months and I was really sad to be leaving. For that time, I had been a small part of MSF and I had loved every moment. My trainers are still covered in red dirt, so I've brought a little piece of the country home with me – a little piece of the MSF world in my own world. It's a world I wouldn't have the privilege of working in without your support. Thank you!

Warm wishes



Francesca O'Hanlon
'Flying watsan'