

Frontline

The newsletter for Merlin supporters May 2012



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Photo: Richard Popham / The Times



MEDICAL EXPERTS ON THE FRONTLINE



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Merlin's midwives: saving lives every day

Every minute of every day a mother dies of pregnancy-related causes, mainly in countries where there are few health services. In some countries, one child in five dies before reaching the age of five. And yet we know that most of these lives could be saved if only pregnant women had access to a skilled health worker.

That is why Merlin is currently working in 16 of the world's poorest countries to improve health services and increase the number of trained midwives available to women. **What's more, your support is helping us to do more every day.**

In Liberia, for example, our midwifery training school is taking students and teaching them health skills, so they can return to their communities and save lives. Experienced midwives are passing their skills on to trainee midwives. Poverty is no bar to training, because the teaching, uniforms and study materials are all provided free.

Mama Zeena's life-saving mission

Zeena Abdalla Ramadhan – known to everyone as Mama Zeena – is a very

experienced midwife who, after years of delivering healthy babies, is working as an instructor at our training school.

Zeena first trained as a nurse in Nairobi, in her native Kenya. But it was in 1985 when she was pregnant that she discovered in the most tragic way how vital midwifery skills are. She started feeling ill on a Friday, and waited for the weekend to pass before going to the hospital. It was too late. The umbilical cord had wrapped itself around the baby's neck, killing him. "Even though I was a nurse, I didn't know," she says, remembering how confused she was.

Now she has retrained as a midwife, and she's on a lifelong mission to help other women save their babies. **"If a mother has access to a trained midwife, a mother should not have to die, a woman should not lose her baby,"** she says.

On the move – by donkey

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away in Afghanistan, where more women die in childbirth than anywhere else on earth, Merlin is working flat-out to save the lives of mothers and babies.



← Mama Zeena has a mission to help as many mothers as she can

Photo: Glenna Gordon

↓ Twins born at Martha Tubman Memorial Hospital, Liberia



Photo: Glenna Gordon



Leila demonstrates a normal delivery to students at a Badakhshan midwifery school

In Badakhshan in the far north-east, the number of deaths is particularly high. So now Merlin's 25 mobile health teams, each with a skilled birth attendant, travel to far-flung villages, often by foot or donkey, to provide antenatal care to these women on their doorstep.

Merlin is also tackling the chronic lack of midwives in the area. Our two midwifery schools in Badakhshan have already trained 224 skilled midwives.

Leila, one of the instructors at the training school in Takhar, has seven children of her own, all girls. She told us: "I became a midwife because I remembered how my mother had a stillbirth when I was 14. She almost died and was alone in the hospital.

"I decided I'd like to be there for women in such situations. The maternal mortality figure is very high here but since we started the

"I became a midwife because I remembered how my mother had a stillbirth when I was 14. She almost died and was alone in the hospital."

midwifery courses we have seen the number of deaths go down."

She adds: "In Afghanistan women live in villages where there is no transport and no clinics. To reduce maternal mortality we need midwives who can do home deliveries. I'd like my daughters to become midwives or doctors - they should follow their mother's example!"



Habiba safely gave birth to her second daughter, Sumah, in Badakhshan Hospital

West Africa

Merlin responds to west Africa's deepening crisis

As a Merlin supporter, you will be well aware of the food crisis that is gripping much of Africa, as low rainfall and crop failures leave millions of people without enough to eat.

The crisis is now intensifying in the arid Sahel region of west Africa – and especially in Chad, one of the poorest countries on earth. As *Frontline* goes to press, Merlin is preparing for a major emergency response operation in the worst affected areas of Chad.

The crisis we face

One of Chad's biggest problems is that it is desperately vulnerable to drought. The poor rainfall in 2010 and 2011 had a devastating effect on food production. Millions of people have been left with little food to eat, as they can neither grow enough themselves, nor afford to buy food at the market.

The children are suffering most from this terrible situation. Even before the current

crisis started, it was estimated that 209 children out of every 1,000 born in Chad die before reaching their fifth birthday. That's a shocking statistic.

Now, with the food situation worsening, it is predicted that 127,000 children aged between six months and five years old will be affected by severe acute malnutrition this year in the Sahel belt of Chad. **More children than ever will die if help does not come in time.**

Hunger and suffering on this scale seems almost too much to even imagine, let alone prevent. And yet in Merlin we know that with the right kind of action we can make a big difference.



Merlin will not just give short-term help and walk away.



Merlin has worked in the Sudan, part of the Sahel region, since 2004

Millions of people have been left with little food to eat
209 children out of every 1,000 born in Chad die before reaching their fifth birthday
127,000 children under five will be affected by severe acute malnutrition this year



Low rain fall, poor harvests, high food prices and continuing conflict have resulted in a forgotten food crisis across the region

■ Sahel region
 ■ Chad



Patients wait outside a health clinic to be treated



A young girl holds her little sister in Chad

Targeting the vulnerable

Merlin is currently planning a targeted approach to saving lives in this crisis-stricken country. Our aim will be to focus on the worst affected areas and the most vulnerable groups, particularly children.

Our plan is to go into the areas to find and treat the children who are most at risk – not just from malnutrition, but from killer diseases like malaria. We will do this by setting up health centres, training local volunteers as health workers, and providing them with high-energy foods, medicines and equipment to save lives in their own communities.

Time for urgent action

Our short-term relief operation will last six months until the new harvests are ready, reducing the threat of hunger. **But, as always, Merlin will not just give short-term help**

and walk away. We will also work with local communities to strengthen their health services in the longer term, so that they can treat severe malnutrition and a range of other conditions that are responsible for the high child mortality rate.

Merlin is already on the move. Emergency response teams are being recruited. Equipment and supplies are being made ready. The government of Chad is desperate for help – to say nothing of the stricken communities where every day brings more preventable deaths.

Please help us to do what we need to do in the next few crucial months – not just in Chad but in many other countries where we are working to save lives in the face of poverty, hunger and disease.

Tackling South Sudan's biggest killer



Betty Cunuya's baby daughter

The most publicised deaths in South Sudan have been the thousands killed in the conflict with Sudan in the north. But these figures are tiny compared with the numbers who perish every year because of the lack of basic health care.

In South Sudan, giving birth often carries the risk of death: one in seven women dies in childbirth. This is largely because more than 90 per cent of all mothers deliver their babies at home, with no trained midwife or health worker to assist them. In fact this is a country where a woman has more chance of dying in childbirth than going to secondary school.

But in Nimule, the southernmost town in South Sudan, Merlin has ignited a spark of hope. With your generous support, we are helping the local hospital by providing supplies and equipment and – even more crucially – training its staff.

One child's struggle

30-year-old Betty Cunuya probably owes her baby's life to the staff of Nimule Hospital and the work we have done to support them. She had been in labour for 24 hours when the

doctor decided to perform a Caesarean. The baby was in breech, with a racing heartbeat, and Betty's blood pressure had rocketed. When the baby was born, her mouth and nose were blocked by mucus and a quick-thinking nurse had to pump out her nostrils before her tiny body spluttered into life.

The day after Betty gave birth, a malaria test revealed she had unwittingly been suffering from the disease and had passed it on to her baby. In the ward, both of them are now in the grip of a fever. "The baby is feeling so weak and I'm not feeling OK," she whispers, as beads of sweat show on her forehead.

Malaria is yet another threat to their fragile health. But the doctors know that in hospital, the pair are almost certain to survive. In fact after a day on a quinine drip, they are already looking better.

Photo: Emily Dugan/Independent on Sunday

"Merlin came and responded during the crisis in 2004, and now they're building up the health system"



Photo: Sabina Morley

Deputy matron Julious Mogga takes blood in the paediatric department of Nimule Hospital

Nurse Jane Kalike, who delivered the girl, says both mother and baby are lucky to be alive. "Imagine what's happening in other areas where there's no access to help. I don't think they would have made it alone."

Transforming health care is saving lives

Merlin is working here in the hope that we can make stories of survival like Betty's less of a rarity.

Dr. David Nyumba Sylvester, medical director at Nimule hospital, said: "The health system here is really bad. You have to go all the way to Juba before you get to another hospital – and that's four hours away. There are various

places with facilities, but the medical personnel are often not qualified."

Dr. Sylvester is one of a handful of doctors who qualified during the war. He was recruited by Merlin to transform services in Nimule and has made impressive progress already. If the hospital continues to improve, it will, one day, be handed back to the government.

Dr. Sylvester is impressed by our determination to help build up South Sudan's health services for the long term. "Merlin came and responded during the crisis in 2004, and now they're building up the health system," he said. "Other organisations, when they respond, do one service and then go. But they're doing it gradually so that they help the country."



A nurse attends to Betty's baby after the 24 hour labour

Photo: Emily Dugan/Independent on Sunday