

## ***Recover your view to see a little further***

The morning of March 18, 2014, 31 visually impaired people from the town of Maine Soroa traveled to Diffa, Capital of the region of the same name, to be operated for cataract. Among them, 29 Nigerian refugees now living in Maine- Soroa following the violence that hit Nigeria. Aware of the passage of the eye care caravan set up by the Government of Niger, UNHCR got in touch with the medical team of the said caravan and deployed logistics and financial resources for refugees to benefit from surgical intervention.

During assessment missions carried out by UNHCR, discussions with people with special needs had highlighted the challenges faced in supporting visually impaired and their families. Blindness requires a particular endeavor in terms of protection. Recovering the view appears as the key to the problem.

According to WHO, 90% of visually impaired people live in low-and middle-income countries. The sunshine but also malnutrition and lack of access to health services are the main explanations. Cataract is the leading cause of total loss of sight. This causes a progressive drop in social-economic standing: as time goes by, visually impaired people are forced to abandon their activities, thus leading their entire family in a situation of economic vulnerability and social exclusion which results, in the end, in the high level of drop-out of school children. In Nigeria as well as in Niger , persons with severe blindness not receiving the attention of their relatives live essentially on begging, survival strategy , extreme adaptation schemes primarily through their own children or accompanying children.

Of the 29 persons having undergone surgery, the majority is from the same city in Nigeria, Gaidam, sometime even coming from the same neighborhood. They knew each other before crossing the border. At one time, more than a hundred “visually-impaired

refugees” and their families were accounted for in Maine Soroa, a town of just 13,000 inhabitants. "Competition" between all these people was strong especially as Maine Soroa also is home to many vulnerable people who depend on begging. Today's low level of grain crops of the previous year and the latest floods affect the ability of the host population to continue sharing scarce resources: in November 2013, nearly a year before the next harvest, more than 30 % of the population of Mainé - Soroa was food insecure. Each family with visually impaired parent becomes an additional burden on the community.

At first, the visually impaired and their families settled in the Grand Friday Mosque of Maine Soroa. The growing number of refugees, their impact on the economy of the local households, and traditional beliefs about the risks posed by the presence of a blind under one's own roof made it difficult to host visually impaired and their families. The UNHCR team of Diffa and the Community Action Committee of Maine Soroa (CAC) then developed significant efforts to find a solution for these people. Thanks to the intervention of the mayor, four collective plots were allocated. Shelters funded by UNHCR were subsequently set up by the Luxembourg Red Cross volunteers through the Niger Red Cross. To avoid the ghettoization process, plots dedicated to visually impaired lie at the heart of the city.

Modern medicine inspires distrust for those people who, in Nigeria, had very limited access to it. Bringing the visually impaired to accept the operation required the development and introduction of a soft approach as confirmed by Abderrahmane Ahmed, Alias Bako, a member of Maine Soroa CAC: *"To have them accept the surgery, one had to demonstrate patience and understanding . At the beginning, some explained their blindness as the result of God's will. So, they resorted to traditional medicine. In order not to contradict them, they were accompanied to consult the marabouts. The aim in the end was to persuade them to come to the hospital in Diffa."* After the failure of this first attempt through traditional medicine, and with the complicity of some benevolent marabouts who themselves are members of the CAC, collective prayers aiming at protecting the visually impaired during surgery were performed. Reassured, the visually impaired agreed to go to Diffa.

In the courtyard of the hospital of Diffa, a mixture of fear and pride could be sensed in those receiving the surgery: fear for those in the wait, and pride for those who have undergone the surgery and who are on the leave. This pride is synonymous with hope for lives that are hanging by a thread.

Aissa , Koila , Buchi and Aissata are four visually impaired women. One is a widow; the other three are married with visually impaired men, because they themselves are visually impaired. Their respective husbands could not be operated due to a too advanced blindness. The four women are grateful to ophthalmologists, to the CAC and UNHCR for their efforts. "Without the efforts of all, we would never have been operated," said Aissa before adding with a stern face "I am saved because soon I can resume activities that I was conducting before becoming blind more than 10 years before, and having had to beg for food." Aissa wants to develop a small business; Koila wants to resume her animal fattening activity. Bintou and Aissata are not yet sure about what to do. For those people who abandoned the little they had, returning to Nigeria is unthinkable. In Niger they hope for a better future.



*Left to right : Koila, Aissa, Bintou. ©UNHCR/B.Moreno/*

It is the same for Bashir, Saleh, Koni and Mani. Bashir is a marabout, and although he can recite verses from the Koran from memory, he admits that at times, because of his advanced age, some parts may not come to his mind. His right eye is painfully functional. He hoped that the operation will enable him to resume the reading of the Holy Book. Saley is the oldest. His body carries the stigma of years of begging. But softness also transpires from his face.

When asked how he felt after surgery, he gave a slight smile, raised his head and answered in a trembling voice, "I am proud to have the operation done. Recovering sight, even with one eye, will allow me to become a complete person." For Saley, the operation will probably not be the

signal of greater financial autonomy, but simply a last period of life during which he will see again his loved ones. It is already enough, sometimes it is no use looking too much further.



*Left to right : Koni, Mani, Saley et Bachir. © UNHCR / B.Moreno*

By late morning, a bandage onto the eye, walking a hesitant step, and in single file, visually impaired and their companions left the hospital. Each surgery did not last more than 15 minutes, a few minutes to give a little hope and most importantly a lot of dignity.