

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Bush schools provide normalcy for children displaced by the conflict

Agnès Sadoua is just seven years old. Perched on the edge of a wooden bench, she swings her legs back and forth freely. Like many other children her age, she is missing her front teeth. She grins as she talks about her love for school, her friends and her family. It has not always been like this however. Three months ago, Agnès, along with many other children and their families, was forced to flee her home in search of safety in the bush.

“Mama woke me up early; we hurriedly dressed and left the house. I was very scared. I didn’t understand what was happening.” Getting up so early was unusual for Agnès. “We left the house in silence, it was still dark,” she recalls. As they walked down the street, the family was joined by the other villagers.

Clutching her younger brother’s hand, Agnès explains how she began the long walk to safety. The only luggage the family was able to take was the small bundle that the mother carried on her head. “I remember the walk through thick bush and the pain in my legs,” she winces. The terrified villagers were purposely avoiding the roads, afraid of bandits and armed groups who regularly patrolled the Paoua area. In the evening they stopped at an abandoned hut next to a field and have remained there ever since, living solely from the cassava growing near the hut. Agnès describes the loneliness she felt, “There were no other children for miles around and Mama said it was not safe for me to go and look for them.”

A few weeks later things changed however. “Some people with matching hats came to talk to my mother,” she remembers. “They brought blankets, kitchen utensils and cereals.”

Some of the parents from other families had cleared a space in the surrounding wood and had set up a shelter made of forks and a tarpaulin. “The same people returned a day later,” explains Agnès, “this time with blackboards, stationery and other equipment. Someone also arrived and started teaching lessons under the tarpaulin.” Agnès recalls fondly the memory of being reunited with the other children from her village and going back to school again.

A joint programme between UNICEF and the Italian non-governmental organization Cooperazione Internazionale, launched in 2006, has meant that Agnès, along with more than 10,000 other children, is now able to attend school in the bush – a temporary solution to a region that has long been ravaged by war. It is hoped that in time UNICEF will be able to extend its programme, establish more permanent schools and promote a far-reaching ‘Back-to-School’ campaign.

For the moment, however, the bush schools provide both education and a sense of normalcy for some of the country's most vulnerable children.

For this reason, UNICEF will pursue these activities, aiming to integrate as many internally displaced children as possible into formal schools or bush schools, thus allowing them to continue their education. Children of these schools have also been provided with the full set of school materials (including textbooks). A similar approach has been used across the Vakaga region where UNICEF works in collaboration with Triangle Génération Humanitaire (France).