

MAURITANIA

Flooding in Tintane: delivering babies in a classroom

On 7 August, at around 10 p.m., the Chief of Tintane's health centre, Dr. Souleymane, was still in the maternity ward to help Zeinabou give birth. Outside, the rain had only just stopped, bringing the total downfall to more than 90 mm in less than 48 hours.

"What frightened us all," explains nurse Abdallahi, "was the rain streaming down the hills overlooking the town. Tintane was inundated in less than three hours. All public and private health infrastructures, including the health centre and the 13 pharmacies, were underwater."

To cope with the emergency, a temporary health centre was set up in the lycée, the first site welcoming flood victims. "All consultations will be free here. Medicines will be free of charge for one week," assures the Director of Disease Control, Dr. Niang. It therefore did not come as a surprise that four days after the community clinic was set up in one of the classrooms people still had to be turned away.

Dr. Niang and the Regional Health Director joined forces with Dr. Souleymane and his team. "In spite of our limited means, we are under enormous pressure with some 350 consultations a day. We even had to deliver two babies in a classroom with equipment brought in from Aioun."

"At the moment, we are not facing a shortage of medicines. Thanks to the intervention of our partners, the needs are covered for at least three weeks," says the head of UNICEF's health nutrition programme, Dr. Jean-Claude Mubalama. "We have supplied emergency health kits to replace the cold chain equipment. We will now have to urgently vaccinate children against measles and rehabilitate the centre for nutritional recovery and education in order to manage acute malnutrition cases, at least during the first month."

If the needs of the population are covered for now, steps of a different nature are still needed. To start with, the temporary health centre will have to be moved out of the lycée before the school year begins and a new location found until the new health centre, which was under construction before the flooding, is operational. For now, many ponder on the saying that 'one man's sorrow is another man's joy'. Mahmoud is one of them. "As far as we are concerned, it has been a long time since we have had health care without spending a single ouguiya. I do not wish for more flooding, but I quite like having free medicine to look after my family properly," says Mahmoud.

At the institutional level, this disaster will have at least led the authorities to integrate 'emergencies' into their Plan of Action. The Minister of Health, who supervises the emergency aid on the ground, gave his assurance that an Emergency Department will be provided for in his 2008 Plan of Action.