



ROLLING BACK MALARIA

Malaria prevention moves forward in Katanga Province.

On the Congo River, upstream from Kisangani, in the eastern part of the country, lies the village of Banduku. It is known for its fine gravel, which is extracted from the riverbed during the dry season. This swampy region attracts workers and their families, but it is also the perfect breeding ground for anopheles mosquitoes, carriers of malaria, the most prevalent illness among Banduku children.

Every month, nurses at the local health centre treat about 160 children under the age of five for malaria. This is a huge number for a health centre serving 5,000 people. At the dispensary, the young patients are given medication to help alleviate the fever. But, of course, the best way of controlling malaria would be to prevent it.

The health committee's 20 mem-

bers travel around the region, usually on foot, since they only have one bicycle. They advise people to drain puddles, explaining that stagnant water attracts mosquitoes. They also give advice on basic hygiene at home, especially around latrines. And they talk about the most efficient way to prevent malaria— sleeping under insecticide-treated bed nets.

Most people welcome these public health activists. On their advice, some families make the 120-kilometre trip to Kisangani to buy mosquito nets that cost 750 Congolese francs (US\$1.50). But the committee sometimes runs into obstacles. "There is a real problem," explains committee member Dieudonné Limboka Lotika. "Instead of blaming the mosquitoes, some people blame the shaman."

In the most impoverished families, sick children are only taken to the

health centre as a last resort. The health committee encourages people to go to the health centre earlier, rather than later. But in areas with large numbers of traditional healers, this message does not always get through, says Dieudonné Limboka Lotika.

Thanks to UNICEF, pregnant women can now get insecticide-treated bed nets for free when they give birth at the health centre. Mosquito nets are also given to children aged three to five who attend the local community daycare.

But there is still a long way to go, since very few children sleep under a mosquito net. Unfortunately, even in areas targeted by UNICEF, only one in two sleeps under an insecticide-treated bed net.