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## Military Fatigues and Ebola Suits



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DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO, SOUTH SUDAN

**Hiding during the day and night**

They sit, crowded inside a small tin-roofed house with no electricity or running water...all hiding. Hiding from what? It used to be from marauding militias in this lawless and forgotten corner of Congo, soldiers who would come in the middle of the night looting, raping, pillaging, burning down homes and taking children back across the border into Uganda or Sudan to be conscripted as child soldiers or sold into trafficking. That was before the outbreak of Ebola. Now some hide not only at night...but during the day as well.

*"We used to hide our children at night so the soldiers would not take them," they tell us. "Now you people come in the middle of the day and say they are infected and you want to take them to one of your Ebola camps. Whether you come at night dressed in green or come in the day dressed in white... all we know is that we lose our children. Why don't all of you just go away?!"* exclaimed a group of women to our surveillance team which was monitoring those who had been exposed to the Ebola virus.

### **No end in sight ...**

We're in the 22nd week of what is now the largest (and deadliest) outbreak of Ebola in Congo's history and the end is not in sight. WHO has predicted that this will last at least another six months. Why so long?



One obstacle is geography. The outbreak is in an isolated part of the Congo; some of the areas where people are dying are simply inaccessible by road. The other obstacle is, of course, war. This part of the Congo, home to nearly 100 militia groups, has been in a defunct state of war for over ten years. As one rebel commander stated, *'just because you have Ebola in your midst doesn't mean we are going to stop attacking'*. A well-known international paper posted an eerie headline last month: ***War and Ebola: the Horsemen of the Apocalypse in Eastern Congo.***

### **Unlike previous outbreaks...**

While we may not be in a Biblical apocalyptic era, we are facing obstacles to bring this virus under control, unheard of in similar outbreaks across the African continent.

I don't remember a time when rocks were thrown at vaccination teams, when roadblocks were erected by the population to prevent the passage of health workers, when people would say our only interest is to prevent the spread of Ebola to our own countries, when a health facility that called for an ambulance to transfer an Ebola patient was burned to the ground by mobs, when mothers lock their children in their homes and tell us there is little difference between us and rebel soldiers who plunder, maim and kidnap children in the middle of the night. Maybe there are some apocalyptic parallels in this current battle against a lethal virus.

In the end Ebola will not be defeated in this part of the Congo by conventional or tried scientific practices. We will only win this fight by winning the hearts and minds and trust of the population. We need to show that our concern is not just the virus, but the individual... and that our ultimate goal is not to secure our borders against the spread of a virus but to stand with our Congolese colleagues on the front lines until this outbreak is over... and then



we may have something to tell and something worthy to share.

*Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be discouraged; for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.*  
**Joshua 1:9**



With hope from Beni, DR Congo, Bill Clemmer