

The Messenger

Medical Mission International

Health, Healing & Hope



The Long Journey for Sight

MMI's most recent mission into the remote Zambezi Delta in Mozambique consumed more than a year of planning and required support and coordination from numerous organizations and volunteers. Despite extreme challenges, the mission was a success. *"This has been our most intensive outreach ever,"* said Johan Claassen, Medical Mission International liaison for remote medical missions in Africa. The MMI sponsored team recently completed 131 surgeries during the twelve day campaign. Five of the patients were children, four of whom were completely blind. Most recipients of these life-changing surgeries were blind from cataracts.

The Zambezi Delta is vast. The Zambezi River splits into many tributaries and marshes that separate villages into small, isolated communities. After an exploratory visit last year, the team chose Marromeu, the nearest town reachable by road, to serve as its base for the surgeries. Marromeu, situated on the banks of the Zambezi is the last big town before entrance to the Zambezi Delta. *"On the maps, the road ends here,"* said Claassen.

Screening and transporting patients required a helicopter, boats, canoes, trucks and motor bikes. In addition to MMI support and funding, Mercy Air provided its helicopter services and the Kingsley Holgate Foundation brought in a long pontoon boat to ferry blind patients on the river and provided critical ground transportation.

Although Marromeu Hospital has limited resources, it is connected to the Mozambique power grid. The grounds of the hospital became the central point of operations during the medical campaign providing space where the medical team set up the massive temperature controlled surgery tent



provided by MMI donors. The medical team also drove in the mobile surgery unit, provided by MMI, which is a converted shipping container, that sits on the back of a 10-tonne lorry and provides a modern, air-conditioned operating theatre. Claassen estimated the round trip driving time for the mobile theatre truck, equipment and team was roughly 132 hours.

Team members travelled to eleven villages to identify and screen patients suffering from blindness who were candidates for eye surgery. Ten patients were transported back to Marromeu via Mercy Air helicopter for eye surgery. The others used alternative transport, including

a combination of walking, river transport and motor bikes. Some patients travelled as far as 150km to reach the surgery location. Patients from Micaune endured a 120km boat trip and an additional 30 km trek that included both motor bikes and canoes.

Eva, a great-grandmother, Pictured above, was completely blind and started her journey on the back of a bicycle, pedalled by her grandson. Team members lifted her from the bicycle and carried her from the river bank of the Zambezi to the Kingsley Holgate Foundation boat that took her 30 km upstream to Marromeu. Just a few days later, she rejoiced after her surgeries were complete and her eyesight restored!

Two blind brothers from the village of Ibo received surgery during the outreach. It typically takes three days of walking, plus canoe transport to reach Morromeu from Ibo. The boys, twelve year-old, Valise and his brother, Jegue Mussa, age five, were flown via Mercy Air to Morromeu for surgery.

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Sight Restoring Eye Surgeries Bring Hope To The Blind

"It is highly unusual to find two young boys in the same family suffering from cataracts," said Dr. Jonathan Pons, who flew to Ibo in advance to screen patients. "If we can we restore sight to these two little boys who have their whole lives ahead of them, it will make this entire campaign worthwhile." The boys received double cataract operations in Morromeu. Volunteers and doctors were thrilled when the bandages were removed from the eyes of Valise and Jegue, post-surgery. Both boys could see.

"Now life will become normal for us. I used to be so frightened that they would wander off and drown in the river. It's going to be a big surprise for my husband and our community is going to be so happy too. My sons' friends will be jumping for joy," said the boys' mother, Brisita.

Valise also told the team that he cannot wait to climb a coconut tree and pick his own fresh coconuts. He also wants to play a game of soccer with his friends. "Before, all I could do was sit on the sidelines and listen. Now I cannot wait to kick the ball," he said.

Another young boy, who received surgery, had been born blind with cataracts in both eyes. *"Today was the first time in his life that he could see,"* texted Claassen from the field. *"It is hard to imagine what it must be like for him."* Claassen said it took the young patient a while to realize what was happening to him. Despite his red and recovering eyes, he was able to count fingers at a distance and he was able to see his mother for the first time.

"We've got quite a few patients who are extremely happy to see again," said Claassen. *"One lady danced for joy and couldn't stop smiling. A man who lost a limb shortly after the war was so happy to see he danced on his one leg."*

According to Claassen, without all of the collaboration, this MMI outreach would have been impossible. Mercy Air's flights provided enormous support. Kingsley's River Trips and the ground transport they provided also played a vital role in spreading the word and getting patients to and from the surgery location.

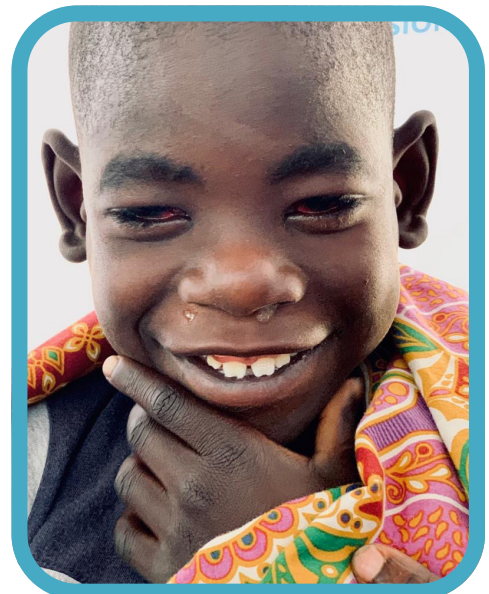
Claassen said it is humbling to think about the trust that the local people give to the doctors and the process. He said many of the patients who come for surgery have never received professional medical care. Yet, they take it all in stride, including the faith required to take the arduous journey.

"Many of these blind patients had to endure a two-day, difficult journey over rough roads on the back of a motorbike and up to 12 hours one way on the Zambezi River," he said.

According to the head of ophthalmology in the country of Mozambique, Dr. Miriamo Abdula, the Zambezi Delta region has never had an eye surgery outreach like this.

"It took using helicopters, Land Rovers, boats, canoes, motor bikes and even bicycles to give the people of the Zambezi the gift of sight," said Claassen.

"We have been wanting to reach these people for many years. We are thankful to the MMI supporters who helped create this opportunity and made it happen." +



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