

Column

Hunger season, Malawi, South-East Africa

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I'm in humid, sticky, somewhat smelly and very sweaty Malawi. People have finished their stocks from last year. The new crops, mainly maize, are growing but they are not ready for consumption yet, meaning food seems within reach but it isn't. This is a truly tantalising time for the Malawian people. Welcome to the Malawian hunger-season.

Not only is this season characterized by its lack of food and income, but due to its humidity it is also a high risk time for malaria and cholera.

I'm staying with a friend, and I'm waking up to the biggest headache that I ever had.

Friend has gone off to work so I force myself to get up and make some food. After only a few bites I start feeling nauseous and the room starts spinning around me. I look at the cold concrete floor of Friend's house and am overwhelmed by its sudden appeal. It must be so nice to lie on such a cold and hard floor, much better than sitting in this chair. I decide to lie down on the floor, and doze off a little. Friend comes home and is shocked to find me on her floor (I still really like the floor actually).

My back hurts, my head hurts, my throat hurts. I feel chilly and even though it's 35°C here I could really do with a warm sweater. Friend decides to take me to the local medical clinic, but as we arrive there, there is no medical staff. Actually, there's no staff of any sort. I sit down on a bench, while Friend looks for... well, anybody? Hello?

There are a couple of other patients here. They are all women; some pregnant, most of them looking very ill. There's a lady who looks pale, not a good thing for a black African. A lady who I think is in labour. Another woman lies with her head on her lap, she's not moving at all.

I wonder... how long have they been sitting here?

The clinic has an interesting message for us; all the staff are out for lunch, and as it's Friday they won't be coming back until Monday morning.

Huh? But what if I actually do have malaria? What about these women here, who are in even more need of help than I am? I'm shocked, annoyed and angry, but I need all my energy for the walk back home.

Friend and I head our way to an international health clinic in town. I get tested positive for malaria. I pay for the test, I pay for my pills, I pay the doctor's fee, I pay the taxi driver who takes us to the clinic, I pay for the phone call to my insurance company to rearrange my flight and two weeks later I am back on my feet again in clean and well organized Amsterdam.

Back on my feet because I could afford it.

Yet... I can't help but wonder how those ladies are.

