

F1 Lamika Kalabudi Joel

Speaker1: That evening, I'm sitting in the living room on my sofa made of leather. My son Jefferson is lying there, resting his head on my lap. We are focused on the famous American series 24 hours. It's a real father-son movie night. My phone rings. I ask my son to put a, put a pause while I answer the call. "Hello? Is this Mr. Lamika?" "Yes, that's me." I replied to this stranger with a loud and imposing voice. The General Secretariat for Health tells me the news. I am on the short list of communicators who are supposed to solve the communication crisis in North Kivu, that of fighting against the infodemia that has destroyed the trust between the local population and the health authorities. So it's 2016. The Ebola virus disease is ravaging the North Kivu region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Ministries of Health decided to send a team of experts to manage risk communication and engage local communities in the fight against the epidemic. It is impossible to say no to my authorities, especially when it is a humanitarian mission. The movie night is immediately interrupted. My son accompanies me to the room to pack my suitcase because the day after the call, I already have to take the flight to Butembo. Butembo is more than 4 hours and 30 minutes away from the flights. I am already giving some directions to Monique, this nanny who has become a very close member of the family. In the morning, Jefferson comes to wake me up to pray before I leave.

Speaker1: It is thus, it is after that that I took the road of the international airport of N'djili. We took a plane reserved for humanitarians. It is 4:30 pm, we land at the airport of Butembo. The flight was long but also tiring. Arrived on the spot, I see a very calm city. My ten colleagues and I wore Ministry of Health vests that said "Ebola Response. People look at us very strangely. I ask directly to Mr. John, the driver who came to pick us up at the airport. He is a native of the city. "Papa John, why do people look at us so strangely? Why the city? It is so quiet?" "My son, and colleagues, here the agents of the response to the coronavirus disease, to Ebola rather, are qualified agents of Ebola business," the driver answered me. I recognize that I have already seen this on the TDRs of our order, but it is especially on the spot that I measure the degree of distrust of the local populations. After a 1 hour drive from the airport, we arrived at the hotel which [...] located in the residential area of the city. It is the five star hotel of Butembo, but the beds are made of bamboo, the rooms are not air-conditioned, the water does not run in the tap, mosquitoes are flying around and spider webs adorn my room. I'm

moving in. I pray to God. I called Kinshasa to inform Jefferson and Monique that I had arrived, and right after that, I went out into the courtyard of the hotel.

So eager to know a little more about the deafening silence that characterizes the city. It is like being in a real monastery. In front of the hotel door, I see Eli, a little boy of nine, shirtless, without slippers on his feet with palm oil in a bag on his hands. I approach it very quickly. He speaks only Swahili. No French, no Lingala either. I understand immediately that the child does not attend school. Me: "Where are you coming from at this hour, my son?" Eli: "I just bought the palm oil for my mother who is cooking for us." And I: "Okay. She's cooking dinner at just 6:00, what time are you going to eat Eli?" He remains silent. And there I add again, "Where do you study, dear Eli?" He will answer: "I do not study." Me: "And why don't you study Eli?" "All the schools are closed." I ask again: "Why then?" And he will say: "There is a war here, the rebels enter everything, enter all the time. They burn our schools, destroy our parents' fields." A few minutes later, a lady comes out in front of a plot fifteen meters from my hotel. She shouts, "Eli! Come quickly! I have to finish making you food! And don't forget, I've already forbidden you to talk to strangers." Eli: "Sir, my mom is calling me." The little one runs quickly. Going towards his mother. At the end of our brief exchanges in Swahili, I keep the image of a very intelligent, curious but also informed little boy.

Speaker1: He reminded me directly of Jefferson. Certainly, before exchanging with Eli, [...] information that the area was undergoing some rebel attacks, but I really could not imagine the scope of these attacks. I walked into the inner courtyard of the hotel, towards the parking lot, I see Papa John sitting on the seat of the 4x4 jeep that picked us up at the airport to the hotel. Without hesitation, I approached him. "Papa John, how bad is the insecurity around here? I passed a small child with whom I interacted and who made me understand the gravity of the situation." Papa John will later confirm to me that the security situation is in the red. In the evening, I talk to my colleagues. They seemed to me to already understand the situation in this part of the country. Just at 8pm we went to eat in the hotel restaurants, then we went directly to our rooms. Once in my room, I opened my computer to continue the 24-hour series I was following a few hours before taking my flight to Butembo. It was at 11:35 pm that I turned off my computer to sleep. It is almost 2 am. The bullets crackle and the city is in a panic. This first day promises to be rough, turbulent and violent. Each of us stayed in our rooms. This was

the motto that was given to us upon arrival. Stay in your rooms whenever you hear the crackling of bullets and do not make the mistake of going outside.

Speaker1: In my heart, I intercede to the sky to protect me. I feel that these bullets shoot our away from my hotel. I can hear that in the neighboring plots, people are shouting and people are crying without knowing what exactly is going on, I can at least guess that the city is under attack. This crackling will last 2 hours non-stop. At 5 a.m., we woke up, all of us in the courtyard. Our looks are timid. The lodgers are all curious to know what really happened. The agents and guards of the hotel brief us. Rebel attacks are regular around here. The rebels come almost every night and terrorize the population. They kill, behead and rape young girls. I had to wait until 7:00 a.m. just to get out on the street and get an idea of the damage caused by these rebel troops. I see deserted streets, a few burned houses, women crying. And on the ground for that matter. I decide to go and see Eli and find out how he is doing after this attack. Just at the entrance of their plot, I see the blood that adorns the courtyard, the women in loincloths crying. I'm looking for Eli and I don't see him. I'm looking for someone to ask, but I don't see either. Everyone is crying, everyone is in a panic. So I took the liberty of peeking into one of the houses on the plot whose door was already open.

Speaker1: As I looked closer, I could see a little boy sitting next to a lifeless body lying in front of him. Obviously, the man was stabbed. The knife is still embedded in his body. Blood is flowing and his eyes are open. I can tell right away that it's Eli's father. I am shocked, traumatized, but also distressed. I quickly get out of there and leave little Eli to contemplate his father's body. Anyway, who am I to take it out of there? I immediately went back to my hotel room. At the entrance of the hotel, I met some guards who did not hesitate to reproach me for going outside. In my room, I cried, I prayed, but inside, I asked myself only one question: how are we going to raise awareness and fight against infodemia in these conditions? How will we have the courage to knock on the doors of the families that are suffering? My colleagues are all in the, in the rooms. I call them and we meet in the hotel hallway. My question is direct: "Dear colleagues, what are we going to do in these conditions? Between staying in this red zone to save the lives of others and going back to save our own lives? What exactly should we do?" The next day we woke up in a timid mood. My colleagues and I decided to stay and fight the Ebola virus disease. Without delay, we began working in the room earlier in the day, interacting with

local leaders, including traditional chiefs, religious leaders, teachers, doctors, and so many other influential people in the area.

Speaker1: The objective was to inoculate the right information related to the Ebola virus. It was thus forty-five days of intense work. In this period of our mission, despite the security crisis that was plaguing the area, we had managed to carry out our tasks sparingly. The determination was much stronger than the fear and anxiety that characterized us. At the end of our mission, local radio stations were now committed to fighting fake news and were sharing the right information and directing people to get vaccinated. Mission accomplished. It was time to go home. The team is complete. In spite of the intensity of the work, which forced us to go even to villages more insecure than the city of Butembo, and in spite of the risks to which we were exposed, I could say thank you to the heavens for having protected us. That morning, at just 6:00 am, Papa John was already at the hotel parking lot to drive us to the airport. After 4 hours of flight, I arrived already in my house and I could lie down again on my leather armchair. Monique is alone. She welcomes me with joy. I ask where Jefferson is? She will answer, "He's at school." I go into my shower to take a bath. My thoughts go straight to Butembo where I meet a brilliant young man by the name of Eli, now fatherless. End of the story.