



breakfast! After two such meals I resorted to a diet of bananas, oranges and local beer, managing to lose half a stone in just seven days!

We had arrived during the civil war which was active in the south of the country, and shortly after we left it spread north, so the hospital came under attack and was destroyed by the rebels. Two years' charitable efforts were lost in the madness of battle and the staff that had not fled to the bush were captured and many of the town's children were kidnapped to become fighters for the rebels. It was a vicious and terrible war that eventually saw British troops sent in with others to establish peace.

Back in England my cynical journalistic mind thought this the end of Cheltenham's Kambian hospital dream – but I couldn't have been more mistaken. The spa's supporters kept in covert contact with their African friends, waiting for the time when they could return and continue aid to one of the most desperate but ironically diamond-rich nations in the world.

Return they did, with great optimism and hard found funds, to establish the status quo. The hospital, which serves 278,000 people in a district with roughly the same population served by Cheltenham General Hospital's region, has been rebuilt, staffed and is tending the sick even with a fraction of the specialists and facilities that we are lucky to have in the UK. They have one local doctor, with Medicine San Frontiers supporting one surgeon. There are also five qualified midwives, with a further 59 auxiliary midwives running clinics and local health care facilities throughout the district. The cash figures donated from Cheltenham and other sources has dramatically improved the situation for the sick in Kambia but the medical figures still add up to frightening numbers. Male life expectancy is just 38 years: female, 42 years. Infant mortality lies at 160 deaths in every 1000 live births; maternal mortality 2,100 deaths in 100,000 live births – this statistic makes it the highest in the world.

Over the years the charity has significantly raised its profile with the support of a professional fundraiser, Cheltenham Round Table and Rotary Club, many local businesses and Cheltenham General Hospital and Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Trust. There is now a dedicated programme of applications to charitable trusts, various foundations and Comic Relief – all aimed at attracting an income to support forthcoming projects, such as the provision of motorcycle low-cost ambulance transport to work between the communities and the funds to train medical staff. The charity also aims to establish a rolling programme of doctors who are prepared to work in Kambia for six months to a year: £12,000 is being provided to refurbish a clinic at Barmoi some 30 miles from Kambia in order to bring more relief to the sick of that region.

It is a wonderful achievement that all these ambitious projects are well on the way to being achieved – and that it all began in Cheltenham – with the selling of coffee, cakes and knitwear! ■