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## VICS: Putting Abakar back together

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# Putting Abakar

Ellen Einterz  
Kolofata, Cameroon

**H**e never heard the shot. Twelve years old, but looking more like ten, his name was Abakar. The night they brought him to us he was wearing a cotton pants and a yellow nylon soccer shirt with a green lion crest under one shoulder. Both were soaked with blood. His feet were bare.

The bullet had entered his right side and drilled through his lower back and spinal canal before tearing through the left flank of his pelvis, shattering the bone and exiting above the drawstring of his trousers.

He was from Banki, a village just over the border, and he had been playing in the street with three friends when a group of soldiers came and told the boys to go home. There was a dusk-to-dawn curfew in effect and the sun was nearing the horizon. The three friends walked away, but Abakar, focused on the stones he was arranging in the dust, did not go. Again the soldiers ordered him to leave, but still he did not go. So they fired into the ground beside him. One of their bullets bounced and struck him in the back. He collapsed.

## Lying in a bloody heap

No one came to his aid: such was the fear in the town. He lay still on the ground until finally one of the soldiers scooped him up and carried him to a house on the corner. A young man dashed to call Abakar's father and mother, who lived nearby. They came running and weeping — and then wailing when they saw their son lying in a bloody heap, unconscious.

His mother flung herself on the body of her son and cried, "My child, my child, my child." His father, standing over the two of them, apologized tearfully to the soldiers. "My son should not have been in the street at such a time. I understand. I understand," he sobbed and begged forgiveness. "How could you have known the boy was deaf?"

## Trouble drifted darkly into Kolofata

This year, the violence that has flared on and off in northeastern Nigeria for years at last erupted and, like ash from a volcano, trouble drifted darkly into Kolofata and other Cameroonian border districts. Tens of thousands of refugees

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from Nigerian towns fled, not looking back at the bodies lying in the streets or the homes burning behind them. They arrived in Kolofata, with the clothes they were wearing and whatever pots, *pagnes* and farming tools they could carry on their heads and in their arms and on their backs.

The struggle in Nigeria is between government forces and a richly armed fanatical group that claims to be fighting in the name of Islam and has decreed forbidden all education and institutions based on anything but a primitive interpretation of the Koran. The insurgents have leveled vicious attacks on Nigerian schools, police stations, government offices, wealthy businessman, political leaders, foreigners, and the United Nations headquarters in the capital. The government has retaliated by obliterating neighbourhoods, villages and towns suspected of sheltering extremists. In their turn, neighbourhoods, villages and towns suspected of not sheltering extremists have been branded government sympathizers and attacked by the other side.

## Stitching tattered tissues

We put Abakar back together as well as we could, removing fragments of bone from the hole in his back and stitching what was stitchable of his tattered tissues. Then we waited for youth to work its magical powers to heal.

Cerebral spinal fluid continued to seep from his wound, causing him excruciating headaches that lasted for weeks. He lay prone on a mat on the floor by his bed all day, all night. His mother camped beside him, chatting words he could not hear, stroking his head, bending and unbending his limbs. In spite of her sadness and her pain, she smiled a lot. And so did he.

Once the cerebral spinal fluid leak sealed itself off, Abakar was more comfortable. Each day he worked on something

# back together



new to show us when we came to see him on rounds. One morning it was the movement he had regained in his right leg, a few mornings later the movement in his left. A week after that he showed us how he had learned to sit again, at first propped up by his mother, but then on his own.

## **“Come quickly!”**

One day when he saw us rounding the corner, he flapped his hands insistently, apparently urging us to come more quickly. We picked up our pace and gestured, “What? What?” When we arrived in his room, he made sure we were watching and then scooted to position himself between the wall and his mother, sitting on the floor beside him. With one hand on her shoulder and the other on the wall, he pulled himself up on his knees. He brought the sole of his right foot to the floor, raised his chest and then his head until at last he was standing tall. His eyes shone and his smile shouted his triumph. He chirruped as if to say, “Will you look at that!” We clapped and punched the air with a glee to match his own.

A month later, we watched Abakar leave the hospital — healed, happy and with hardly a limp.

Though he is unique in many ways, Abakar’s unassuming courage is no different from that of so many young people we see every day who cope heroically with stark tough lives. The chance to cheer these children on is but one of the many gifts that make Christmas in Kolofata last from one December to the next. ■