

**This is the personal account and images of reporter and photographer Yusuf Omar, a 23-year-old aspiring war correspondent covering his first international story; The aftermath of an ammunition depot explosion in Brazzaville in The Republic of Congo in which 250 died, thousands were maimed and over 30,000 people were made homeless.**

Twelve hours ago I was at Johannesburg fashion week reporting on women prancing down the catwalk on long legs. Now I'm jumping of a plane in the heat of the Congo to meet women with no legs.

My life ambition, from as far as I can remember, has been to be a foreign correspondent. That romantic notion of parachuting in to an unfamiliar situation. Coming home with my camera bloody and my conscience muddy. Nothing could have prepared me for this.

We race to ground zero, crossing red lights and brushing past lampposts in a convoy of blue and red lights.

Within two minutes of arriving at the epicentre of the blast zone, Jacko the sniffer dog scratches at a pile of corrugated iron and rubble. The warm smell of dead meat stings the nostril. The flies race the dog to what could be a deep freezer of decaying food. Or the 251<sup>st</sup> carcass.

Brazzaville resembles an earthquake or a tsunami without the water. But this was no natural disaster, it was manmade. Why was there an ammunition depot in the centre of a residential area? Because of decades of civil war, arms had to be close at hand.

A row of crumbling tanks in the distance; great picture. I slide under the barbed wire and flaccid red tape cordoning off the area, biting my notepad with camera in hand. A group of Congolese soldiers scream and shout for me to turn back. "Parlez-vous engle? (Do you speak English?) I ask walking on.

The rockets, AK47s and unexploded bombs which pave the way increase in intensity, until I'm on my tiptoes. This was a really bad idea I think about halfway to the tanks, but far enough not to turn back.

Risk to a journalist is like a cheap drug fix. It makes you feel alive. Always flirting with the line of safety without paying the price, yet. "We don't even send our sniffer dogs out there. No picture is worth losing your legs for," says one of the rescue team when I return.

Yet, with every building pancaked within a five kilometre radius, decaying bodies and lives torn apart, I can't force out a tear. It just feels like walking through the set of a big budget apocalyptic Hollywood flick. A dead body, or 250, doesn't scream.

The military hospital pushed me where it hurts.

"Mama! Mama!" the howls of a man echo down a gloomy green corridor. He is my father's age, crying and clinging to a bedpost. His leg looks like it's been mauled by a shark with rabies as a team of doctors scrub his puss filled yellow foot with a wet cloth. A surgical mask hides my jaw dropped mouth and the translator faints. You can taste the blood in your mouth; salty.

Down the corridor louder cries beckon. "Kill me doctor. Kill me now," screams a woman in French as a doctor cuts the green gangrene flesh away from her open kneecaps and five nurses hold the woman down by the shoulders. I don't know whether to run to the international doctors who have anesthetics and painkillers down the hallway and tell them of the horror or stay and witness. So I hide behind my camera and watch through the viewfinder. Every time I look at it straight on I vomit and swallow.

On the morning of our departure I take a taxi to the camps which collectively house more than 30,000 displaced people. Things have deteriorated significantly since my first visit. Buzzing flies and babies crying are the residual soundtrack. The path I once knew is a murky river. Children brush their teeth in it, and women wash dishes. It looks like there has been recent rainfall but the sky hasn't shed a tear all week. It's sewage. Doctors say the boiling pot of filth, garnished with overcrowding is a recipe book description for Cholera. Thousands will die.

As we board the plane home I feel the story is still coming. This is just the beginning.

There is nothing romantic about covering a disaster. I still want to be a foreign correspondent but I never want to become cold and immune to the suffering and pain like some of the old hacks.

Find videos to all these scenes at [www.youtube.com/journalisminaction](http://www.youtube.com/journalisminaction)

Yusuf Omar travelled to Congo with Gift of the Givers