

# Browns escape terror-torn Zaire

By JEANNE BENDER

When Dr. Christopher Brown and his wife Bess left riot-torn Zaire 14 days ago with their two young children it was with mixed emotions:

They were profoundly grateful that they'd been able to leave the capital city, Kinshasa, without any bodily harm to themselves or their sons, Maxwell, 3, and Jordan, 14 months. "Chris," a physician with the National Institutes of Health, was thankful that he was able to bring out his records, on computer discs, of his three years of AIDS research in Zaire. However, Chris and Bess also experienced a sense of loss at leaving behind all their possessions, and a deep concern over the welfare of their Zairian friends in the ravaged, bankrupt country.

In an interview last Saturday, nine days after they were evacuated from Zaire, Bess and Chris recalled the terrorism that had surrounded them during the last days at their home in the American compound just outside Kinshasa. At the Darien home of Bess' parents, Mary and Sal Giaratana, the young couple seemed relaxed and objective as they spoke of the violence they had recently left behind.

"On Monday morning, (September 23) we were at home listening to the American Embassy radio," Bess recalled. "There were warnings such as, 'If you're going into town be careful because there are some problems. Half an hour later, we were hearing: 'If you're in town, stay in town. If you're at home, stay at home.' Fortunately, we were all at home early in the morning."

For the past year and a half, the young physician and his family had lived in one of the 14 houses in the walled American compound just up the hill from Kinshasa. Before that, they'd rented a private home.

They were thankful to be in a walled compound that Monday



Safely ensconced at her parents' Darien home, Bess Brown, right, and husband Chris, with sons Max, center, and Jordie, relax after their ordeal. The teddy bear Max holds is one of the very few items the family took out of Zaire with them.

morning when rioting and terrorism erupted in Kinshasa. The trouble began when about 3,000 Zairian paratroopers mutinied because they had not been paid for several months. After pillaging a Kinshasa airport supply depot, the paratroopers drove into town and began looting the shops. Other Zairian soldiers, and then civilians, joined the looters, stripping shops and homes of everything they could carry.

Listening to the Embassy radio, Chris and Bess heard countless tales of terrorism and pleas for help.

Chris said, "Americans in town were calling in and saying things like: 'They're shooting

outside my door. They're breaking down doors. There's looting next door.' People with guns are right outside my house!"

"Nobody got into our compound. But you could hear them shooting and breaking into houses nearby. There was a lot of shooting all around."

"They were shooting right over our wall," Bess reminded her husband.

On Monday and Tuesday there was chaos, they said, with continuous shooting by day and at night when red tracer bullets streaked skyward. The American Embassy had moved armed Zairian guards and some U.S. military to the compound. More Americans, along with a few families of other

nationalities, were brought in for safety. A Canadian family moved in with the Browns.

"On Tuesday morning, we had a meeting in the compound at the swimming pool," recalled Bess. "There was a mob pounding with rocks on the gate. The military guards kept them out."

"After that, there was a lot of shooting," said Chris. "Tuesday night, the Embassy radio informed us we were going to be evacuated."

When asked if they hadn't been terrified, Bess said, "All the women were gathered at our house because we were farthest from the gate. There were gunshots all around, but everyone was pretty calm."

The corners of her brown eyes crinkled and, unexpectedly, she flashed a broad smile. "All the women agreed that if we were in the United States hearing all that shooting we'd be wrecks! That struck us all funny."

Shooting continued throughout Tuesday night. On Wednesday morning, there seemed to be a sudden, all pervading calm. French troops had arrived and were restoring order. Belgian troops had also been flown in.

"Everyone cooperated," declared Chris, noting that French and Belgian troops had been flown into Zaire by United States military transport planes. "The American Embassy did a great job taking care of the Americans, arranging for their evacuation. We had the feeling they must have been preparing for this."

There had been civil unrest in Zaire for many months, and angry opposition to President Mobutu Sese Seko who has ruled the country since 1966. A near collapse of the economy and a more than 1,000 percent inflation, food shortages and a free fall of the value of local currency were creating an economic crisis. The virtual halt to democratic change, promised by Mobutu, added fuel to the sudden, angry explosion of discontent.

The rampage of Zairian soldiers and civilians was widespread. "Americans didn't seem to be specific targets, at least as far as killing went," Chris said. "But the looters wanted to get into their houses."

On Wednesday, when things seemed to have calmed down, he risked a trip into Kinshasa to pick up some important materials at the National Institutes of Health lab.

"The streets were virtually empty," he said. "All the store windows were broken. Iron bars had been torn off windows. Every type of building had been ransacked."

Looters had stripped shops,  
Continued on page 20

991  
Bess Brown-Bender

# BROWNS ESCAPE

Continued from page 5  
restaurants, houses, government buildings and a hotel of everything transportable, including light fixtures and carpeting.

Bess said, "There was one French woman who was holding her baby. They even took all the clothes right off the baby and

mistreated the woman."

She said that some Europeans were left barefoot and in their underwear, all clothing stripped from their bodies as well as their closets. Some people reported seeing beheaded bodies, some in military uniform, on the road that leads to the airport about 24

miles from the city center.

However, Dr. Brown and his family were evacuated over a different route. Thursday morning, American Embassy officials arrived at the compound with buses and trucks escorted by armed guards. Bess thinks that about eight vehicles made up the

convoy which evacuated residents and those who had been brought to the compound for safety.

They were each allowed one small suitcase. Chris was able to bring his lap computer containing important medical information and Bess couldn't leave with-

out the teddy bear that had been a first present from her husband. All other possessions were left behind.

"We left everything we owned — china, crystal, clothes and books," said Chris.

"And two guitars and all the

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TOWNE LIQUORS

Imperial CLEANERS

## BROWNS ESCAPE

*Continued from preceding page*  
baby things," put in Bess.

Her husband explained that in a situation like theirs, the Embassy gets the people out first, then tries to ship out belongings. "We're not sure that will happen," he said.

When the Americans left their residential compound, only a few unarmed guards remained there. Chris wonders if the person to whom they gave power of attorney will be able to sell their car.

Bess said sadly, "They wouldn't allow any pets to be taken out."

"They said they would try to get them out later," her husband reminded.

Because there was still trouble at the airport, the Browns' convoy traveled to the port area on the Congo River which had been secured by French troops.

"It was great to see the port

filled with French soldiers in their red berets," said Chris. "We had no trouble getting on a ferry to Brazzaville across the Congo River."

Bess enthusiastically praised the American Embassy at Brazzaville, Congo. "They'd set up a tent, had cookies and peanut butter sandwiches and bottles of water. They took us all in and took care of us. We were there for four hours and everyone had a chance to rest. Then they gave us our air tickets."

At 5 p.m. on Thursday, September 26, they began their flight to Frankfurt, arriving about 3 a.m. The American Embassy there put them up in a hotel for three hours. They bathed and ate and at 6:30 a.m. on Friday boarded buses that took them to the Frankfurt airport.

All of the children had been tagged with labels on their backs.



Americans board buses at their compound during the evacuation.

"There seemed to be millions of little people like 'Jordie' and 'Max' running around on the plane coming home," Chris commented.

"They hadn't really had much sleep all week," said Bess, "what with all the excitement and the constant noise of gunshots."

They put down at Kennedy Airport at 4:25 p.m. on Friday, arriving at the Giarrantana home without much more than a change of clothes. Bess is enormously grateful to the people at Person to Person who heard of their meager supplies and sent over a stroller and some children's clothes.

Relieved to be out of Kinshasa, Bess is nevertheless saddened by having to leave Africa which she loves.

A graduate of Catholic University with a degree in anthropology, Bess was in West Africa with the Peace Corps from 1982 to 1984. She graduated from Darien High School in 1977.

Chris, who formerly lived in El Paso, attended Baylor University Medical School before joining the National Institutes of Health. He's not yet decided whether to continue at NIH or go into private practice.

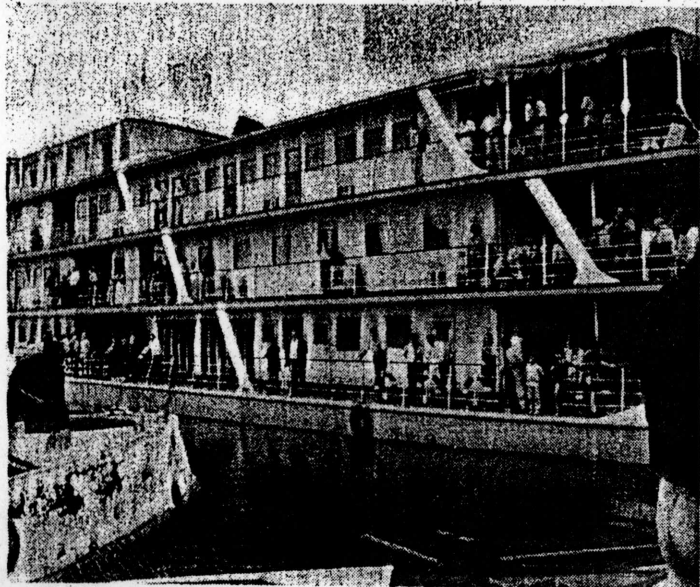
In a few weeks, when "things calm down," he plans to return to Zaire to retrieve some important material he had to leave behind at the AIDS research laboratory. He plans to be in Bethesda for at least a year to complete his

research project.

"But right now our most immediate problem is to get a car and find a home," Chris said.

"And get some baby things," Bess added, smiling at her husband.

One thing is certain. Whether Dr. and Mrs. Brown remain in the United States or return to Africa, the most important anticipated event in their near future is the birth of their third child in March.



Belgian citizens are evacuated aboard a ferry boat at a Congo River port. The Brown family escaped on the small boat whose bow is visible at left.