

# ZANZIBAR'S MALARIA HUNTER

Armed with two wheels, a tablet and lots of data,  
one woman takes on a deadly disease



For millions of Tanzanians, a potentially deadly  
disease is just one bug bite away.



It is a threat that lurks in the shadows as the sun falls, flutters through holes in bednets at night  
and multiplies in puddles after a summer storm.

Throughout history, more people have died of malaria than of any other disease. Despite recent global advances, malaria still kills more than 1,000 children each day, most in sub-Saharan Africa.

For the 1.3 million people on the islands of Zanzibar, off the coast of Tanzania, the bite of the Anopheles mosquito has always been a real and present danger.

## Habiba Suleiman Sefu is fighting that danger, one case at a time.

She works as a malaria surveillance officer in Shakani village, in southwest Zanzibar.

Her job: to track, test and treat cases of the disease to stop its spread.

“In Shakani village, people fear malaria because they are infected so often,” Habiba says.

The 29-year-old environmental science graduate deeply believes in the power of science and technology to save lives. “In life,” she says, “health is important above all else.”

In a conservative Muslim country where a woman is rarely seen publicly without a man, Habiba lives an independent life. Her husband lives more than 700 kilometers away on mainland Tanzania where he works as an accountant and only returns home once a month.

“My husband is unique as he is very supportive and encourages me to do many things that most women here do not do,” Habiba says. “He wants me to get farther than where I am.”



Habiba is  
independent—and  
busy.

She wakes before sunrise to pray, and then rouses her children from bed and gets them ready for school. If the electricity is not working that morning, her chores are done by candlelight.

She nurses her daughter, cooks breakfast and takes her two sons to the bus.

Only then does her day as a “malaria hunter” begin.



Once a mosquito carrying the parasite that causes malaria bites, it is almost certain to do so again, putting family members or those living in close proximity at risk. It is essential to detect cases early and respond quickly.

While malaria has always existed in Shakani village, Habiba is now armed with new tools to fight it: a mobile phone, a tablet, a motorbike and lots of drive.



Though they might not seem novel, these tools—supplied to her by the U.S. President’s Malaria Initiative—help her respond to the disease in record time and help authorities identify outbreaks.

Every time a malaria patient is recorded at a clinic in her area, Habiba gets an SMS text on her mobile phone.

When a new case comes in, she reports to the clinic to review it, using her tablet to enter the location into a GPS system, which USAID developed to track the disease.

“Some days I receive up to seven cases through SMS, depending on the season,” Habiba says.





**Few women in Zanzibar ride motorcycles. Habiba does.**

With her USAID-provided motorcycle, she zips around to visit many more malaria-affected families than she could reach by foot alone.

Though it is far from a common sight, the villagers welcome her as she throttles up to their homes, toting medicine, diagnostic equipment and other supplies.

Once at a home, Habiba tests for malaria using a rapid, finger-prick test.

If any household members test positive, Habiba gives them medication on the spot. She then counsels the family on how to treat the disease and prevent transmission.



“I educate people on the importance of keeping their environment free of standing water because mosquitoes multiply in a wet environment,” Habiba says.

“I also tell them that it is important to go immediately to the hospital to test for malaria if they feel any symptoms, and to use medication immediately before it spreads to the whole family.”

By detecting and treating cases early, Habiba stops transmission with the first infection.

Before she leaves, Habiba assesses the house for risks, including standing water and holes in mosquito nets.



She makes sure that the family has enough long-lasting insecticide-treated mosquito nets to protect them into the future.

The results from her visit go in her tablet, and then up into the cloud, where the information is used to map malaria’s path and the efforts to eliminate it.

“The data is so important,” Habiba says. “We need to know how many malaria patients we had each year. We need to know which villages are most affected by malaria and when malaria is at its peak. Without the use of our tablets and phones, we would not be able to accurately record this information, to find the patients or to treat them.”

Like many Tanzanians, Habiba has seen a tiny insect disrupt countless lives as children fall ill, students miss school, and adults stop work and are unable to provide for their families.



Habiba wants to see malaria wiped out of Shakani village and greater Zanzibar entirely. “I want to see citizens fully educated, empowered and mobilized on ways to combat malaria,” she says.

Less than a decade ago, malaria affected one in four residents of the archipelago.

Today, thanks to modern tools, a concerted campaign to treat and protect residents, and a world-class surveillance system, Zanzibar’s malaria prevalence rate is just 1 percent. Thanks to Habiba, malaria hunter, they are nearly there.



## About this story

Despite significant recent global gains, it is estimated that every minute, a child dies from malaria. The U.S. President’s Malaria Initiative, or PMI, was launched in 2006 by USAID and the CDC, with ambitious goals to reduce malaria deaths.

In Tanzania—where 70,000 people die from malaria each year—our efforts have protected and treated millions. In less than a decade, we have delivered more than 4 million insecticide-treated mosquito nets and 31 million treatments, and have sprayed countless homes with insecticide. Child mortality has dropped by 28 percent.

In Zanzibar, PMI, with support from its partner RTI International, helped the Zanzibar Malaria Elimination Program launch the world-class Coconut Surveillance System in 2012 to track and control the disease. Surveillance officers like Habiba use a tablet, phone and motorcycle to quickly respond to cases of malaria, test family members and neighbors, and record the data in the cloud, where it can be stored and analyzed. Their work is helping eradicate the disease from the archipelago.

Thanks to these combined efforts, the prevalence of malaria in Zanzibar has been reduced from 25 percent in 2005 to less than 1 percent today.

Photos and video by Morgana Wingard for USAID

The original article from USAID can be retrieved at the following link:

<https://stories.usaid.gov/zanzibars-malaria-hunter/>