

Operation Pacific Angel leaves lasting impression

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5/31/2008 - KAMPONG CHHNANG PROVINCE, Cambodia (AFP) -- When temperatures approach 90 degrees with 90 percent humidity by 6 a.m. in the rural Cambodian province of Kampong Chhnang, excitement fills the air. News has spread far and wide by the Imam, a local religious leader, and by word of mouth. American medical people have returned to help the Cambodian people here.

The Friendship Clinic staff expects to make contact with at least 3,000 Cambodians here during its five days of Operation Pacific Angel 01-08, a joint/combined 13th Air Force-led humanitarian assistance operation taking place May 25 to 29.

"When we arrived to open our doors at 7 a.m., we were surprised to see more than 200 people waiting to be seen," said Master Sgt. Grace Devera, site coordinator with Pacific Air Forces International Health Alliance, or IHA.

"They came by every conveyance imaginable, but mostly on foot, and by 8 a.m. there were more than 500 people," said Sergeant Devera.

The Friendship Clinic operates four main clinics: primary care, dentistry, optometry and women's health. The Kampong Chhnang Friendship Clinic was built by a Marine Corps task force in 2005 and is one of two unilateral partnership clinics run in Cambodia.

"We are expecting to see up to 600 patients a day in our four clinics," said Sergeant Devera. "We have three primary-care doctors working with three Royal Cambodian Armed Forces primary-care doctors, three Cambodian dental students working with our dentists and 13 translators who are key to the language barriers."

Most often the villagers come because they have no money to be treated for minor problems at their local clinics, which are usually reserved for the most serious conditions, according to Sergeant Devera.

"At patient intake, we make contact with mostly women, children and older men. Their problems are as simple as headaches to a toothache, and the older folks come mostly for eye problems," she said. "After a height, weight and blood pressure check, they are given a number and wait to be seen by a clinic (staff member)."

In a country where dental care is almost non-existent to the population's majority, the Friendship Clinic's dentists are treating up to 100 people a day.

"We have three two-person teams with one Air Force dentist and one Cambodian dental student per team, plus one RCAF dentist," said Col. Mark Beehner, a dentist assigned to the 375th Dental Squadron at Scott Air Force Base, Ill.

"So far, we have made contact with very few people who have ever had any type of dental care," he said. "In fact, there are so many teeth that have to be removed, we have to limit it to one fourth of the mouth."

Poor dental care is reflected in many of the Cambodian patients seen.

"What we had to do in the case of one woman who never had dental care was to perform a surgical extraction of a tooth that had severe decay and was abscessed," said Maj. Philip Clark, a dentist assigned to the Washington Air National Guard's 194th Medical Group at Camp Murray, Wash.

"I came here with a bad toothache and they fixed me," said Man Hasenus, a Cambodian patient. "I feel so happy now. I was scared at the beginning but the doctors calmed me."

On the first day of operations, it was not only the dentists who were busy, the doctors in primary care had their hands full too.

Generally, people were showing up with chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes that had gone a long time with no treatment, according Maj. Nisha Money, a preventive health physician from the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences at the Bethesda Naval Medical Center in Washington D.C.

"We are treating a lot of non-communicable intestinal and skin diseases and we are seeing some chronic conditions, which we are not equipped to handle," said Lt. Col. Chris Perez, a primary care doctor with the Guam Army National Guard. "What we do is give them some counseling on how to take care of those conditions."

For the people needing follow-up care and long-term monitoring, the IHA staff is working a referral program to provide sustainability and continuity.

"This mission is not a band-aid approach to treating people, but a capacity-building effort through building relationships between our U.S. medical forces, the RCAF, provincial health departments and local non-governmental organizations in order that follow up and continuity of care is sustained as a result of our medical mission, " said Major Money. "The ultimate goal is to empower the Cambodia medical corps with skills and resources, so they may be self-sustainable."

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