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Photo: Shabtai Gold/IRIN

Six-month-old Jamal and his grandmother Haifa, from the Gaza Strip, during a checkup

HOLON, ISRAEL, 20 January 2008 (IRIN) - With violence in the Gaza Strip and along Israel's southern border escalating, a small hospital in Israel offers a ray of hope for a handful of seriously ill Gazans.

"This child would have died without surgery," said Dr Alona Raucher-Sternfeld, as she simultaneously looked at the small Palestinian baby, Jamal, and the echo machine checking his heart.

Six-month-old Jamal came with his grandmother, Haifa, from the Dir al-Balah refugee camp in the Gaza Strip to get a check-up on 15 January at the Wolfson medical centre, an Israeli governmental hospital in Holon, a suburb of Tel Aviv.

Jamal was operated on here when he was two months old, suffering from two heart defects. His tiny size further complicated the surgery, which was ultimately a success, the doctor said.

"When he came here, he was blue. It was an emergency," Raucher-Sternfeld said, reviewing the initial referral from Al-Awda hospital in Gaza.

Haifa now asked the questions typical of all grandmothers: why is he not talking or rolling over yet? Before the operation the queries had more to do with his chances of survival.

The surgery, hospital stay and logistics in bringing him out of Gaza were coordinated and partially funded by Save a Child's Heart, an Israeli humanitarian organisation, with some European Union donations. In 2007, 128 Palestinian children from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, all suffering from heart conditions, were treated by the programme and the hospital.

Israeli rules

However, even this organisation could not bend the tight restrictions at the Erez border crossing between Israel and Gaza. Jamal's 24-year-old mother is too young to be allowed out of the enclave, according to Israeli security regulations, and the grandmother was sent as an escort instead.

Col Nir Press, head of the Israeli coordination and liaison administration in Gaza, recently said Israel requires rigid security rules, as Palestinian militants have, in the past, taken advantage of permits issued for medical reasons. In 2004, for example, four Israeli soldiers at the Erez crossing were killed when a Palestinian patient blew herself up inside the terminal.

Press also said the number of permits to Israel issued for medical reasons had risen 50 percent in 2007 compared to the previous year. Some foreign aid workers said this was a result of the closure of the Rafah border crossing with Egypt.

Young people not allowed to leave Gaza

Sometimes, simple mistakes of clerks, or clogged up bureaucracy, cause problems.

One-year-old Shahed, from northern Gaza, came with her grandmother to the hospital late in the day. They had been held up at Erez for an extended period of time, as someone had mistakenly entered the wrong date on the permit application.

The aging woman collapsed on the floor as she finally reached the hospital waiting room, tears of exhaustion - but also relief - rolling down her cheeks. She said she ran around inside the Erez terminal, trying to speak with Palestinian and Israeli officials, explaining she had an appointment for the young baby, who recently had a pacemaker put in by the Wolfson surgical team.

"I have diabetes, I'm not strong" she said, breathing heavily, as Jewish and Arab hands helped her into a chair. Like all Palestinians, she brought with her a small but weighty valise, just in case the doctors would make them stay more than one day.

“If there's an Israeli child and a Palestinian child, whoever is in a more dire condition will get treatment first.”

Shahed's 19-year-old mother and 20-year-old father have little chance of leaving the enclave.

Beyond race, religion

Volunteers from Save a Child's Heart stressed the apolitical nature of their programme, noting that the man who started it 10 years ago, Ami Cohen, who has since died, believed strongly in looking past race, religion and nationality, and instead preferred to focus on individuals.

"If there's an Israeli child and a Palestinian child, whoever is in a more dire condition will get treatment first," said a hospital nurse.

And even with the Arabic-Hebrew language divide separating most of the staff from the Palestinian patients, a strong lesson on positive dialogue and cooperation emanated from the hospital examination rooms.

shg/ar/cb



Photo: Shabtai Gold/IRIN

Maureen, a volunteer nurse with Save a Child's Heart, prepares Salma, a two-year-old from Gaza City, for an EKG

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