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March 15, 2007 , By Julie Poucher Harbin

Abass Farhat surveyed the destruction in the hills of the Lebanese border-town of Kfar Kila from the window of the town's freshly painted and refurbished Al Zahraa health clinic.

With the help of International Medical Corps, the clinic, which suffered major damage during last summer's conflict with Israel, resumed operations in its original space on January 1. Kfar Kila is so close to the border that the red roofed homes of the small northern Israeli hill town of Metula can be seen from the clinic window. The border fence dividing the countries lines the main road into town.

IN LEBANON, IMC HAS:

- physically rehabilitated 29 clinics, including one hospital, throughout southern Lebanon and expects at least six more to be completed by early March
- supplied 40 clinics in Southern Lebanon and two clinics in the Bekaa Valley with medicine, medical supplies, medical equipment and furniture. Twenty-five of these clinics have received generators and some have received office supplies, computers and printers
- plans to supply medicine, medical supplies and furniture to several clinics, including a maternal-child health center in conflict-affected suburbs of Beirut
- supported 20 medical specialists in clinics throughout southern Lebanon

Farhat, a municipal council member who is one of the Al Zahraa health clinic's original founders, came this late December day to welcome the latest delivery of medicine and furniture. This particular IMC caravan arrived amid sleet and bitter cold.

For roughly four months, with IMC assistance, the clinic operated out of a few rooms in a local elementary school. Meanwhile IMC refurbished, re-equipped and re-supplied the original clinic and its pharmacy.

Crucial for clinic operations, patients have been receiving medicine free-of-charge since September from IMC.

IMC steps in at a critical time

With 75 percent of homes damaged and livelihoods ruined, IMC came to help Kfar Kila's 9,000 residents at a critical time, according to Mayor Moussa Shyt. The economy of Kfar Kila largely centers on tobacco and olive production, and he says most of the fields were burned during the conflict with Israel, while small businesses in town also suffered.

"Of course they carry the medicine at the private pharmacies, but not all people can buy these medicines, especially after the destruction of the economy," said Farhat explaining that since the conflict it has been especially difficult for people with chronic illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, epilepsy and diseases of the digestive system, to afford a continuous supply of medicine.

"The medications cover between 70 and 80 percent of the people's needs," said IMC pharmacist Zahra Shaitly, describing an IMC program that supplies more than 100 different drugs to 40 clinics in southern Lebanese villages hard-hit by the conflict.

Amira, a senior citizen, watched with curiosity as IMC laborers unloaded medicine cabinets, examination tables, office chairs and desks.

"I was getting medicine for hypertension at the school clinic and from here before the war," she said.

Word of the "new" clinic spread fast. Khadisha Balhas stopped in on moving day with her three-year-old daughter, who needed a second injection of a doctor-prescribed antibiotic. Since the pharmacist, Abu Adnan, happened to be there unpacking pharmaceuticals, he was happy to help.

Adnan said he is grateful to IMC for its help. "We would not even dream that we could receive the aid and help that we've received now."

A busy clinic with patients from neighboring villages

With an average of 200 visits per week, the clinic has the highest number of patients of all clinics in the region that IMC supports. Even though the population of Kfar Kila is 9,000, thousands more are estimated to visit the clinic from neighboring villages.

"It was the first clinic in town that operated with all kinds of specialists. It was fully equipped," Adnan explained. "But during the war I lost all equipment including an ECG, sterilizers and ultrasound equipment."

Now the clinic is back up and running with 14 doctors, a dentist, pharmacist and nurse. IMC supports two of the clinic's doctors—an ophthalmologist and a gastroenterologist. (IMC Lebanon provides temporary incentives to fortify the medical staff of some clinics in need of specialists)

IMC delivered a replacement ECG machine, a sterilizer, nebulizer, speculum, autoscope, and other medical equipment and supplies. IMC also donated office supplies, a computer, printer and generator.

Serving the town of Chaqra long after the emergency phase

About a 45-minute drive from Kfar Kila through the mountains--four miles from the Israeli border-- nurse Jenan was unpacking the latest delivery of IMC-donated pharmaceuticals at the Al Rissalah Scout Imam Al Sadr clinic in Chaqra. The clinic had just opened at full capacity the day before.

The Al Rissalah Scout clinic, which was founded in 1986 by a non-profit health association, was forced to operate at about 10

percent capacity after it suffered a direct hit by missiles targeting a nearby mosque, during last summer's conflict with Israel. Since IMC completed rehabilitation in late December, it has treated an average of 80 patients each week.

IMC began supplying medications to the clinic on a monthly basis in November, as the emergency phase subsided and other humanitarian agencies wound down operations.

Like in Kfar Kila, the Al Rissalah Scout clinic received donations of furniture and medical equipment and supplies, from IMC, which is also supporting two specialists out of 13 doctors who work there -- a gynecologist and cardiologist. IMC also donated a new dental chair to replace a damaged one. It is the only clinic in the community with a working ambulance and emergency medical care

The Al Rissalah Scout clinic, the much smaller Ministry of Social Affairs-run clinic next door (which IMC rehabilitated in partnership with the World Health Organization), and a private clinic in Chaqra serve a population of 10,000.

"We are addressing the deficiencies and the aim is to improve services at least to the pre-war level, or if possible, better than the pre-war period," said Dr. Haidar Sahib, IMC Medical Coordinator.

"We are trying to have our effect for the long run. For example when you supply equipment, when you supply furniture, when you supply even medication, you increase the income (potential) of the clinic. Whether you are supporting a clinic for three months, or four months or six months, it's like feeding a child who will grow up and eventually be able to walk on his feet by himself."

Bilal Kachmar, a reporter with the Lebanese National Broadcasting Network, filed a report about IMC's work after seeing first-hand how relatives benefited from pediatric antibiotics and medicine for chronic illnesses at a clinic that IMC supports in his village.

"I was touched by the critical and continuous help of IMC to the clinics and to the people. Not only am I touched but I feel that I got help and assistance from IMC whether in a direct or indirect way," said Kachmar.

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