

Trip to Gaza heartbreaking for Utah doctor

By Matthew D. LaPlante The Salt Lake Tribune

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The mother wrapped her arms around her 1-year-old daughter's body. The nurse held the child's head. And the doctor worked, stitch by stitch, to repair a laceration that stretched from the little girl's cheek to her lip.

There was no anesthetic to ease the child's pain.

"So this little girl, you know, she could feel it," said Irfan Galaria, a Salt Lake City plastic surgeon who returned Sunday from a 10-day humanitarian mission to Gaza. "Every time I stuck her with the needle she could feel it."

Galaria was among 14 doctors from the Islamic Medical Association of North America who traveled to Gaza in the wake of an Israeli military assault there that left more than 1,000 dead and several thousand more wounded, according to both Israeli and Palestinian casualty estimates. Although the two sides dispute the number of casualties that were civilians, Galaria said it was clear from his perspective at Gaza City's al-Shifa Hospital that noncombatants -- including children -- suffered greatly in the fighting.

And among the wounded he treated were many suffering from what appeared to be white phosphorus burns. U.S. manufacturers, among others, produce phosphorus shells for use in lighting up nighttime battlefields and creating smoke screens, but international law bans the use of the hot-burning shells in densely populated areas like Gaza.

It is Gaza's density -- the small stretch of land is similar in size and population to Philadelphia -- that makes it a difficult place to conduct military operations without a large degree of collateral damage. "I was surprised and shocked to see the extent and the degree of civilian casualties," Galaria said.

Making matters far worse, he said, was the utter lack of medical supplies, everything from towels for surgeons to dry their hands after scrubbing to anesthetics for use in minor surgeries like the one Galaria performed on the young Gazan girl.

Galaria said the recent fighting aggravated a situation that was already dire. "They lack medical supplies, food, clothing -- anything that you can imagine," he said.

California lawyer Ahmed Kasem, who helped arrange transportation, lodging and served as a translator for the doctors, said he fears that the world has been given an incomplete picture about the situation in Gaza.

"It's heartbreaking," he said, "because from my personal vantage point, these people have no future. There are no jobs. There is nothing coming in or out. They've been locked up, isolated and forgotten."

Having spent several days stuck on the border between Egypt and Gaza, the team wound up with just

seven days to treat patients - and there was still much to do when they left.

"There definitely is this feeling that we have unfinished business," said Kanwal Chaudhry, an emergency room doctor at King's County Hospital in Brooklyn. "Seven days is just not enough. We need to go back and do more."

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