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Rehabilitation for Gazan Children and Young Adults

Years of conflict in the Gaza Strip have killed and injured thousands. In response to the need for survivor rehabilitation, Slovenia's ITF Enhancing Human Security and the University Rehabilitation Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (URI Soča) initiated the Gaza Project, a rehabilitation program for injured children and young adults. Since the Gaza Project's inception in 2009, more than 300 children and young adults were medically evaluated, 100 children and young adults received treatment and 18 local medical professionals were trained at URI Soča.

by Nataša Uršič and Goran Gačnik [ITF Enhancing Human Security]



Rehabilitation of a child from the Gaza Strip at URI Soča.
Photo courtesy of Arne Hodalič.

The 22-day Israel-Gaza conflict in the Gaza Strip (27 December 2008–18 January 2009) killed 1,300 and injured more than 5,300 Palestinians, and killed three and injured 182 Israelis. The conflict caused extensive damage to commercial enterprises, public infrastructure and agriculture.¹ Additionally, the eight days of conflict in November 2012 left more than 160 Palestinians dead (43 children) and more than 1,200 injured.² The hostilities also had substantial

emotional and psychological effects on the population. Today, Gaza's population of about 1.76 million lives in overcrowded conditions, with poor housing and deteriorating infrastructure, and 43.5 percent of the population is age 14 or younger.^{3,4}

According to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "humanitarian organizations are re-establishing basic services, including water, health, food, cash assistance, education and psychosocial support. Work has already begun on conducting repairs to shelters, water and sanitation systems, health facilities and other essential infrastructure."⁵ ITF Enhancing Human Security's (ITF) work with these organizations provides it with important statistical data and logistical information that aids patient rehabilitation. The plan is to keep working in the Palestinian territories until Palestinians have adequate capacity to provide rehabilitation services themselves.

Disability and Rehabilitation in the Gaza Strip

Roughly half of the Palestinians injured as a result of the Israel-Gaza conflict were women and children, 15 percent of whom became disabled from their injuries. Additionally, 1,269 people, 431 of whom were children, were injured during the November 2012 conflict.⁶ According to general estimations by the World Health Organization, 7–10 percent of any given population in the world has some kind of disability; in the Palestinian territories, this suggests that the figure is around 280,000–400,000 people.⁷ Their needs are significant, as the Gaza Strip has only one rehabilitation hospital, Al-Wafa, which was damaged during the 22-day conflict.⁸

Currently the Al-Wafa, Al-Shifa and Al-Fata hospitals in the Gaza Strip perform surgical operations. Only

one prosthetic workshop, the Artificial Limbs and Polio Center (ALPC), produces lower-limb prostheses. In addition, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has seven outpatient clinics providing medical services to residents of the Gaza Strip. Besides ALPC and UNRWA, local rehabilitation societies also provide basic services to patients, mostly related to home visits (i.e., physiotherapy, adaptation of homes and accessibility). Jabalia Rehabilitation Society, National Society for Rehabilitation Care, Society of Physically Handicapped People, Association for the Injured, Sanabel Asthma Energy and the Blind Society all provide these types of services.

In addition to the lack of medical resources, disabled people in the Gaza Strip face professional and social discrimination. Although attitudes toward persons with disabilities injured in the First Intifada, a 1987 uprising among Gaza Strip Palestinians, are less discriminatory (those individuals are commonly regarded as heroes by other Palestinians), most persons with disabilities in Gaza generally face discrimination on a daily basis. People with multiple or hidden disabilities (for example, a physical impairment combined with an intellectual impairment), disabled women, and mothers of disabled children often face harsher discrimination. Restrictions of movement at security checkpoints pose particular challenges for people with limited mobility (wheelchair users, people on crutches), intellectual impairments and visual disabilities.



Medical triage in the Gaza Strip.
Photo courtesy of the ITF.

Although physical- and mental-rehabilitation systems have developed in recent years in the Gaza Strip, many injured persons, especially children, cannot access proper medical treatment and devices because of lack of money, long waiting lists and political problems.

The Gaza Project

The former President of the Republic of Slovenia, Dr. Danilo Türk, visited Ramallah, in the Palestinian territories on 30 January 2009, where he met with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and former Prime Minister of the Palestinian National Authority, Salam Fayyad. They discussed the humanitarian needs in the Gaza Strip and possibilities for Slovenia to provide meaningful and targeted humanitarian assistance. Through the International Trust Fund (ITF), more than US\$2 million was raised for the Gaza Project, a project that finds ways to help children and young adults in the Gaza Strip obtain the treatment they need.

Following these meetings, ITF, in cooperation with their implementing partner University Rehabilitation

Institute Republic of Slovenia (URI Soča), developed Gaza-specific projects that included physical and mental rehabilitation and local capacity building. ITF also cooperated with local organizations in the Gaza Strip, including ALPC, UNRWA, the Palestinian Trauma Center, Martyrs and Casualties Families Care Association, and the Assalama Charitable Society, to help identify children and young adults needing immediate treatment. ITF, in close cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia, Slovenian embassies in Israel and Egypt, and the Representative Office of the Republic of Slovenia to the Palestinian National Authority in Ramallah, enabled the safe transportation of Gazan children to Slovenia for treatment and rehabilitation.

On 10 June 2009, the first group of 21 children, selected for injuries that could not be successfully treated in the Gaza Strip, arrived at URI Soča. The URI Soča medical team examined the selected children. Eleven children were missing one or more limbs for a total of 16 amputations: seven transtibial

amputations, five transfemoral amputations and four upper-limb amputations. Three children suffered from severe traumatic brain injury, three from spinal cord injury, three from peripheral nerve and soft tissue lesions, and one from congenital hip-development disorder.

Since the program's inception in 2009, the URI Soča medical team evaluated 300 children and young adults, aged seven months to 22 years in the Gaza Strip. Of these, 100 were admitted into the one-month rehabilitation program at URI Soča. After admission, the patients underwent a thorough examination by a medical team consisting of a medical doctor, physical and rehabilitation specialist, nurse, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, medical technician and in some cases a psychologist, neurologist and an internist. Rehabilitation goals and individual rehabilitation plans were designed for each patient.

These plans included the necessary physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and fitting of prostheses and orthoses as well as other technical devices, such as powered wheelchairs, orthopedic shoes, crutches, walkers, therapeutic tricycles, standers and lumbar-support belts. During rehabilitation, further diagnostics were performed, including electromyography, X-ray and examination by consultants at the University Medical Center in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Rehabilitation plans and goals were adjusted according to new diagnostic data. The patients' health was monitored by the physical-medicine and rehabilitation-specialist physician on duty, a registered nurse and a medical technician.

The prosthetic and orthosis technicians were responsible for the production, testing and fitting of the medical aids, such as lower and upper limb prostheses and knee, ankle and foot orthoses. In some cases (especially with children less

than eight years old) parents traveled to the rehabilitation program in Slovenia with their children. Parents and their children were educated about how to use and maintain the medical aids during rehabilitation treatment in Slovenia. Technicians in rehabilitation engineering worked on the application of other medical aids such as individually adjusted wheelchairs, walkers and other devices to help the patients with daily activities in their living environment.

Besides the regular rehabilitative program, the children participated in other information-sharing activities presented by a psychologist and a group of volunteers. Children also went on several trips to Slovenian tourist sites, including Postojna Cave, Lake Bled, and the Adriatic Sea. In the afternoon, they exchanged knowledge about Arabic and Slovenian cultures with Slovenian volunteers in various workshops. The children also enjoyed the cooking lessons in which they prepared traditional Slovenian dishes.

Two to three Gazan medical and rehabilitation professionals escorted each group of patients to Slovenia for treatment, where they also received training. In total, 18 doctors, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, nurses and

Case Study From the Gaza Project: Jamila Alhabbash's Story



Jamila.
Photo courtesy of Arne Hodalič and Jaber El Masrey.

Jamila was born in the Gaza Strip. She dreamed about her future and a career in journalism. On 4 January 2009 she was on a roof feeding doves with her sister Shatha, brother Mohamed, and cousins Isra and Mahmoud when a rocket struck—killing Shatha and Isra. Mohamed lost one leg. Jamila was severely injured and had both legs amputated above the knees.

Jamila was in a coma for a week. When she woke, the doctor told her that she lost both legs but would recover. In those first moments, she did not feel that she had lost parts of her body and did not understand what it is like to depend on a wheelchair for mobility. Throughout her recovery, she continued to dream about being a journalist.

ITF/URI Soča invited Jamila to participate in 2009 in the one-month rehabilitation program. She went through intensive medical rehabilitation

including physiotherapy and occupational therapy. URI Soča fitted her with sophisticated, active above-knee prostheses. Jamila was also equipped with a wheelchair and crutches. Naturally, as Jamila grew, she had to be fitted with new prostheses. She attended the rehabilitation at URI Soča for a second time, as she was included in the ninth group in October 2012, when she received additional physiotherapy and was equipped with new prostheses.

Following proper rehabilitation and fitting with quality prostheses, Jamila enrolled in Al-Aqsa University to study journalism. Now she is undergoing field training with the Ma'an News Agency and has an opportunity to fulfill her life-long ambition.



Rehabilitation at URI Soča.
Photo courtesy of Arne Hodalič.

social workers from the Gaza Strip were trained at URI Soča since 2009. Each professional has a training program specific to his or her field. An important part of the program was training received on the job; the professionals performed medical procedures on the Gazan patients, which allowed for more direct, personal experiences. The newly trained professionals generally continued to work with the same patients throughout their treatment.

Jaber El Masry, the ITF coordinator for the Gaza Project, travels to Gaza twice a year for two weeks at a time to implement post-rehabilitation evaluations and checkups on the ground in the Gaza Strip.

ITF's Future Plans

ITF is planning to bring an additional group of seven children to Slovenia for treatment at URI Soča in autumn 2013. Two rehabilitation specialists will travel with the children to Slovenia to attend rehabilitation training.

Subject to the availability of funds, ITF plans to continue its presence in the Gaza Strip with the following projects:

(1) the psychosocial project, "Rapid Re-

sponse and Rehabilitation Programme: R3 (Family Therapy) to care for war victims in the Gaza Strip," in conjunction with the Palestine Trauma Center, which provides psychosocial aid for victims of continuous siege and recent conflicts, and (2) training of local rehabilitation specialists, a continuation of the Gaza Project, in the Gaza Strip by experts from URI Soča. ©

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