

Tripler surgical team partners with Bangladesh Army docs in “Sight, Sound, and Smile” mission

Story and photos provided by Lt. Col. Christopher Klem

A team of seven medical personnel from Tripler Army Medical Center recently teamed with army physicians from Bangladesh in an extraordinary surgical mission to treat impoverished civilians at the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) Bogra, a



While Bangladeshi physicians observe, Maj. Ben Cable (center) and Capt. Andrew Senchak (left) perform cleft lip surgery.

Bangladeshi Army hospital. The “Sight, Sound, and Smile” mission name is derived from the three types of disease addressed by the surgical team: cataracts (sight); chronic ear disease (sound); and cleft lip and palate (smile).

The deploying team consisted of two Ear, Nose, and Throat (ENT) staff surgeons, one ENT chief resident, one ophthalmologist, one noncommissioned officer-in-charge, and two surgical technicians. All mission-essential surgical items were brought by the team, while anesthesia support was provided by the Bangladeshi Army.

Forty-four patients had life-changing surgery during the four-day mission. “It was really incredible to see how much of a difference we made,” said Maj. Ben Cable, an ENT surgeon who performed cleft lip and palate surgery on 12 patients, and was the

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mission's team leader. "Bangladeshi children born with a cleft lip deformity are frequently ostracized and often unable to lead a normal life," Cable said. In developed countries, cleft lips are typically repaired when a child is three months old, while the average age of the cleft lip patient on the mission was five years.

Diseases such as cataracts and chronic ear disease are usually treated at a much earlier stage in developed countries, but frequently progress to cause major problems when left uncared for. "We literally had people who came in blind from advanced cataract disease and were able to see after surgery," said Maj. Brett Nelson, the team's ophthalmologist.

The mission goals were to offer specialty surgical services to Bangladeshi patients that are typically unavailable, as well as to train the Bangladeshi doctors to perform these surgeries.



The Sight, Sound, and Smile Team with three Bangladeshi Army physicians get a warm welcome to Combined Military Hospital, Bogra.

U.S. and Bangladeshi Army physicians worked closely during the mission to accomplish this complex task. "There were sometimes two U.S. and two Bangladeshi physicians around a patient in surgery at one time," said Sgt. Melissa Aschenbrenner, a Tripler surgical technician. "By the end of the mission, the Bangladeshi doctors were able to do a lot of the surgery on their own," Aschenbrenner said.

Newspapers and radio broadcasts had announced the arrival of the team weeks prior to arrival and prospective patients were screened by local civilian doctors at one of

the Bogra rural health clinics. Through coordination between the regional health minister and the Bangladeshi Army, patients were then given access to the Bogra CMH where further evaluation was done by Bangladeshi Army physicians. “The Bangladeshi Army really deserves a significant amount of credit for the arrangements to take care of the civilians during this mission,” said Sgt. First Class Robert Nelson, mission NCOIC and surgical technician. “It would be comparable to a US medical center opening its doors to treat the local population,” the NCO said.

Bangladesh is the most densely populated country in the world and one of the poorest. Nearly 150 million people live in an area approximately the size of the state of Iowa. With average per capita income less than \$200 per month, most of the population lives in poverty. Although a national healthcare system exists, access to medical care is difficult for most of this rural population. Bogra, a city of 285,000 in the Rajshahi region of northwest Bangladesh, was chosen for this mission because of the extreme poverty in this mostly agricultural area.

The Sight, Sound, and Smile mission was supported with funds specifically dedicated by U.S. Pacific Command to promote relations between the U.S. military and various nations in the region. After the success of the operation in Bogra, the Tripler team hopes to carry out future missions in Bangladesh, as well as other countries in the area.