

## Albania's Hospitals Battered by Turmoil

*By Barbara Ruben*

From an influx of wounded patients to gunmen who opened fire in an operating room, hospitals across Albania have been hard hit by the violence that was triggered by the collapse of pyramid schemes, which caused thousands of citizens to lose their savings.

Hospitals have been looted, and medical and food supplies are low. At a hospital in the southern Albanian town of Delvina, for example, an ambulance was stolen and hospital records were destroyed. A hospital in Pogradec, close to the Macedonia border, nearly ran out of food until businesses stepped in with donations. And in the northern town of Shkoder, a doctor was shot and killed in a hospital, and a man was shot to death on an operating table in the middle of an emergency operation for a gunshot wound.

Although partner hospitals in Tirana have fared somewhat better, they have faced shortages and a high volume of patients since the violence began in February.

"Some days we have an epidemic of admissions," said Pellumb Karagjozi, MD, director of Central Trauma Hospital in Tirana. "Our staff has been really motivated and we've been not only able to save the lives of our most of the patients, but ensure a high quality of life for them as well. A high percentage will have a normal life."

Karagjozi's staff has been too busy scrambling to find empty beds, gauze, sutures and oxygen to estimate the total number of wounded who have sought treatment at the hospital. But they have postponed all scheduled, non-emergency surgeries to make room for them until the violence abates.

Karagjozi also notes that the hospital has seen many patients with multiple injuries. One of the most severely injured patients had numerous fractured bones, punctured lungs and ruptured arteries. He said he is also seeing an increased number of amputations and severe burns due to explosions.

Even Tirana's University Maternity Hospital has been affected by the unrest. Although the number of deliveries has remained stable, doctors are seeing a rise in premature births: Normally, 7.4 percent of births are premature, but in March and April 7.9 percent of the births were ahead of schedule, said Zhani Treska, MD, director of the hospital.

"In the last few months, pregnant women haven't been able to be followed by their doctors as well. Either they haven't been treated or they've been under-treated," Treska said in explaining the change in premature births.

Hospital staff also fear for their own safety in the wake of several attacks at hospitals. In late May, 50 members of Albania's Republican Guard stormed a Tirana military hospital after a fellow guardsman died there from wounds he received in a shoot-out in a town outside of Tirana. The special police opened fire in the hospital and beat the hospital's deputy director.

In response, more than 500 hospital personnel stopped work to demonstrate for two hours against the violence. "We cannot work under these conditions. If this situation continues, we will just take off our white coats," chief nurse and union leader Margarita Minai told reporters.

And in the town of Lushnje, 50 miles south of Tirana, about 40 gunmen burst into the operating room of a hospital in April, riddling the walls with bullet holes and smashing windows. Ambulatory patients fled the hospital during the rampage.

Although there has been no violence reported at partner hospitals, three partner exchange trips have been canceled, said Judy Van Dam, partnership coordinator at Butterworth Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In addition, Butterworth is donating two cardiac care monitoring systems, but is waiting until the situation stabilizes to ship them to Albania.

"We keep thinking we'll be able to go over next month and then we think, we'll be able to go the following month, but the situation is too volatile right now," said Van Dam, who was able to meet with Tirana partners in Zagreb at the CEE conference. "We've got a lot to do, and we're looking forward to a more peaceful time in Albania."