

Operation Provide Hope Launches 500th NIS Aid Shipment

By Joanne Neuber and Barbara Ruben

On a clear June afternoon, a US Air Force cargo jet the length of a football field and six stories high laden with 130,000 pounds of donated medical equipment and pharmaceuticals careened down the runway on its way to Uzbekistan. The trip was the 500th such flight made to the NIS with excess medical supplies from decommissioned US military hospitals and private donations. Called Operation Provide Hope, the collaborative US Defense and State Department effort began in 1992, and has provided \$2 billion in emergency medical, food and clothing relief to the NIS. More than 400 nongovernmental organizations, including AIHA, have contributed to the project since it began.

US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton; Richard Morningstar, special adviser to the president and secretary of state on assistance to the NIS; and the ambassadors of Uzbekistan, Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan attended the June 17 send-off ceremony at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland to commemorate the 500th airlift.

"Operation Provide Hope represents the best of what America stands for and what we can do with our leadership in the world. It is a testament to American teamwork, compassion and faith in democratic values," Clinton said. "In lands where American military planes once inspired fear and loathing, they are now couriers of hope and friendship."

The ceremony was shown live on Uzbek television. "As with all the previous 499 flights, it will be a message of good will, a message of new ties of diplomacy from heart to heart, diplomacy from people to people," said Sadiq Safaev, ambassador of Uzbekistan.

According to Charles Hardesty, director of humanitarian assistance to the NIS with the Department of State, medical supplies donated via AIHA and other organizations "have made the biggest impact...and produces returns as high as 50 to 1 for every US government dollar invested."

AIHA was one of five private voluntary organizations selected to participate in the ceremony and delivery of the supplies. Three staff members from AIHA's Washington office traveled to Uzbekistan with the donation.

Equipment and pharmaceuticals were transported both via plane from the US and train from a US military base in Germany to AIHA partners at the Second State Medical Institute in Tashkent and other health care facilities in five outlying Uzbek regions. In all, the donation was valued at over \$22 million.

Ten of large pallets on the aircraft were organized by AIHA and contained pharmaceuticals for outlying hospitals in Karakalpakistan, Uzbekistan, including \$1.5 million in insulin donated by Eli Lilly and Company, \$500,000 worth of antibiotics donated by Schein Bayer, \$60,000 in equipment donated by AIHA partners at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and \$16,000 in equipment from AIHA founding member Premier, Inc. of Chicago. The remaining airlifted donations were sent to four other outlying regions of Uzbekistan, and contained pharmaceutical donations by the nonprofit organizations Project HOPE, Heart-to-Heart, Americares and Counterpart Foundation. A 40-person Department of Defense hospital installation team provided delivery and installation assistance to each of the five sites.

The rail-transported donation included X-ray machines, sterilization equipment, beds and other medical equipment from AIHA partners at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Premier, Inc and the Department of Defense.

John Post, the Department of State coordinator for medical donations who accompanied the airlift and spearheaded the ground transport donation to Tashkent, said he considers the AIHA hospital partnerships "a perfect match" for the hospital upgrade projects because the ongoing partnership relationship between US and NIS hospitals "helps to ensure proper follow-up training and equipment upkeep."

Virtually every US partner hospital has donated equipment and supplies to their NIS partners via Operation Provide Hope. One of the initial DOD shipments went to future AIHA partner hospitals in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in February 1992, and included \$16 million in oncological, pediatric and other equipment that was deemed necessary following an initial hospital needs assessment by a team of US military biomedical technicians. A similar shipment of cancer-related medical supplies valued at \$10 million was sent to partners in Minsk, Belarus in January 1994, and included a special welcome by First Lady Clinton. And \$15 million worth of equipment was sent to partner and other hospitals in Armenia in October 1996.

The Operation Provide Hope humanitarian assistance team will continue to bring medical donations to the NIS. A flight scheduled for the fall will travel to partner and other hospitals in Almaty and Semipalatinsk, Kazakstan.