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Locals lead medical mercy mission to Nicaragua

60 local doctors, nurses, volunteers to provide much-needed care

Xochitl Peña
The Desert Sun

There are nights when Ines Allen lies awake in bed, mentally running down the list of small but crucial action items involved in planning a 10-day international medical mission.

Will there be enough operating and examination rooms? Will the 3 tons of supplies and equipment shipped months ago be there?

The Rancho Mirage resident has been traveling on medical missions to Third World and developing countries since 1987 and knows that each mission provides unique problems and rewards.

After a year of intense planning for her latest trip, though, she's ready.

Through her nonprofit organization, International Medical Alliance, Allen will begin her mission Thursday with a crew of about 60 doctors, nurses and volunteers to Somoto, Nicaragua, a dusty and rural city, known as the "City of Burros."

"We are literally going to see thousands of patients. We're going to see all kinds of tragedy, poverty, illness," said Allen.

The Coachella Valley has its own challenges, with record unemployment, soaring foreclosures and families struggling to make ends meet. Still, the team of volunteers — the largest ever assembled by the Rancho Mirage-based alliance — are using 10 vacation days or taking unpaid leave to treat the country's poorest and sickest, many of whom have never seen a doctor in their lives.

The contingent includes physicians and surgeons with specialties in ophthalmology, anesthesiology, pediatric anesthesiology, internal medicine, plastic, maxillofacial, pediatric pulmonary and orthopedic surgeries.

Volunteers will help people walk again with the use of prosthetics, smile again with improved dental hygiene and live longer through preventative health care.

"Some of the people we see are suffering from medical conditions that they don't have financial means to repair," said Jeff Crider, a volunteer translator from Palm Desert embarking on his third mission with the alliance.

The need in Nicaragua is far too great and not all patients who show up will be seen or treated because of time constraints and advanced diseases.

“The number of people that want to have procedures is way more than we can do,” said Dr. Doriana Cosgrove, a La Quinta anesthesiologist. She is the surgical director for the mission and will be in charge of scheduling operations.

In 2000, the first year, the group provided 1,658 people with some level of service. Last year, they helped 4,794.

The trip is the first of a three-year commitment to the residents of Somoto to follow up with patients who undergo major surgeries.

The first full day in Somoto will be spent pre-screening patients and organizing the American clinic and pharmacy inside the Hospital Juan Antonio Brenes Palacios — a one-story cement block building with an entrance surrounded by dirt and gravel.

“We are ready, logistically we are ready. We are much better organized than we’ve ever been,” Allen said.

Allen used to be a dental office manager and had traveled with the Flying Samaritans to Mexico decades ago. Now, preparation for the missions through her nonprofit, established in 2000, has become her full-time job.

At first, she had to plead with doctors to join. By now, through word of mouth, people know of her efforts and ask to join.

“I told them I could do anything for them. Whatever they need me to do I’m willing,” said Cathedral City Fire Chief Bill Soqui who with his daughter Meghan, 19, a student nurse, will travel with the group for the first time this year. He met Allen through the Cathedral City Rotary and decided to help.

On previous missions, tents have been erected outside the hospital or clinic so patients could be examined.

“It was as if it was a Rolling Stones concert,” said Gillian Cross, a Cathedral City volunteer who remembers the horde of people waiting to be seen last year.

She plans to make the trip this year and once again will work in the makeshift pharmacy, disbursing thousands of free medications and vitamins.

Hospital officials from Somoto sent photos of prospective patients so IMA doctors could prepare.

One photo shows a young girl who suffers from a severe facial deformity.

Another depicts a somber young boy who is missing his entire left leg. Yet another shows a father of three who lost both his hands. Nicaragua is believed to have more land mines than any other country in the Western Hemisphere, lethal remnants of its devastating civil war in the 1980s.

The group will work up to 12 hours a day to see as many of the patients who line up as possible. But the mission will be much more than 10 days of treating patients and curing ailments.

The American team will lead educational seminars for the local doctors so they can learn how to continue treatments.

The tons of donated medical equipment, medicines and supplies worth more than \$600,000 will stay with the community for use long after American doctors leave.

And though Allen has given tens of thousands of dollars to support the missions, there has been tremendous support from volunteers and the local medical community.

Volunteers pay for their flights, ranging from \$300 to more than \$600 apiece. Lodging and meals are provided free by the local government and a hotel.

Cliff Daniels, chief development director with Desert Regional Medical Center, said the Palm Springs hospital strongly believes in the group's mission.

He said the hospital is pleased to have played a part through the donation of money, supplies and medicines for the trip.

“The physicians that go and do this don't get paid. They give of their time and expertise,” he said. “We are pleased to be able to support all of them.”

Xochitl Peña covers Indio and Coachella for The Desert Sun. She can be reached at (760) 778-4647 or at xochitl.pena@thedesertsun.com.

Additional Facts

Coming Monday

Read about Ines Allen's passion for helping people, and meet some of the local volunteers.

About IMA

The International Medical Alliance of Rancho Mirage provides health care to indigent in Third World countries through medical missions.

To donate

For information or to donate money or medical supplies for the mission, call the alliance at (760) 485-8963 or go to www.internationalmedicalalliance.org

The Desert Sun chronicles the trip

Reporter Xochitl Peña and photographer Marilyn Chung are accompanying the International Medical Alliance on its mission to Nicaragua. Look for reports and photos in The Desert Sun and on mydesert.com.



Doriana Cosgrove, an anesthesiologist, will be traveling to Nicaragua for a medical mission with the International Medical Alliance. She talks about some of her own medical equipment that she will be bringing on the mission while in the operating room at the La Quinta Surgery Center. (Marilyn Chung, The Desert Sun)



International Medical Alliance founder and president Ines Allen (left) and her aunt Ines Gonzalez prepare a shipment of supplies in one of three storage units for the organization's medical mission in Somoto, Nicaragua. (Marilyn Chung, The Desert Sun)

Locals lead medical mission to Nicaragua
 Doctors, nurses and support staff from the Coachella Valley will head to Somoto, Nicaragua, on Thursday for a 30-day medical mission to provide health care to the country's indigent population. The trip is organized by the Rancho Mirage-based International Medical Alliance.

WHO'S HELPING
60+ volunteers including doctors, nurses, technicians, dentists, and support staff are donating their time and travel to travel to Nicaragua.

MEDICAL CENTER OUTREACH
3 local hospitals: Desert Regional Medical Center, Eisenhower Medical Center and John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital have all provided supplies and/or money for the mission. This year, Desert Regional gave \$1,000 and JFK donated an anesthesia machine, worth about \$1,000.

CONTINUED SUPPORT
\$600,000 worth of medical equipment, medicines and supplies will stay in Somoto for use after doctors leave.

About Somoto, Nicaragua

- Somoto means "valley of peace."
- The city is known as the City of Burreo.
- It is located about 2,300 miles from the Coachella Valley and has a population of about 40,000, similar to that of Coachella. Of that population, about 15,000 people live in the urban area while the rest live in nearby communities.
- According to the World Health Organization, there's an average of four physicians for every 10,000 people in Nicaragua.
- In addition to the lack of health care, many in need simply can't afford it.
- Only about 10.2 percent of the country's population is insured.
- Somoto's sister city is Mendocino, Calif.

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