

For Immediate Release
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Medical Diplomacy Reaches New Heights as 207 Iraqi Operation Smile Patients & Families are Flown Safely Back to Baghdad

Coordinated efforts of U.S. Air Force, U.S Dept. of Defense, U.S. Dept. of State & Operation Smile Bring Smiles to Iraqi Children

Norfolk, Va. --- Thanks to an historic effort of collaboration, 207 Iraqi children and their families are back home in Iraq, following nine days spent in Amman, Jordan, where 110 children received free medical evaluations and reconstructive surgery to repair their cleft lips and cleft palates courtesy of Operation Smile Inc., working side-by-side with our foundation and medical volunteers of Operation Smile Jordan. Transport out of Amman was provided by a United States Air Force C-17 aircraft, when it became clear to Operation Smile officials that the 22-hour trip home by bus might not be safe for the group of 207 Iraqi patients, families and medical professionals. With concern for both the safety and post-operative recovery for the patients paramount, Operation Smile sought a diplomatic solution to conclude this important humanitarian effort. The resulting flight on April 29 became possible through the cooperation of many, including the U.S. Departments of Defense and State, as well as the actual airlift carried out by U.S. Air Force personnel.

About the Flight

Courtesy of Maj. Robert Palmer, CENTAF-FWD Public Affairs, Media Relations Officer,
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AMMAN, Jordan and BAGHDAD, Iraq --- As they stepped into the large, gray military cargo plane, their eyes widened and their expressions were equal parts wonder and bewilderment. This was the first time many of the Iraqi children and their parents had ever flown in an airplane, and none had ever been in an aircraft as large as the United States Air Force's C-17 Globemaster III.

On Saturday, the aircraft based in Southwest Asia flew 110 Iraqi children and 97 of their parents, guardians and escorts from Amman to Baghdad in support of "Operation Smile."

Operation Smile, an international non-governmental organization, provides corrective surgery for cleft palate and cleft lip, congenital birth defects that affect approximately one out of every 600 children, according to the Cleft Palate Foundation. Operation Smile had evaluated the Iraqi children and transported them to Amman for corrective surgery.

Operation Smile Co-Founder and CEO Dr. William P. Magee, Jr. and chief medical officer Dr. Robert Rubin wrote to Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and requested assistance from the United States Air Force to provide safe airlift for the Iraqi children and their parents.

The Air Force received approval for the mission late Friday evening and by early Saturday morning, the C-17 was airborne and enroute to Amman.

After the young patients and their parents had settled into their seats, they listened intently as Dr. Talib, a plastic surgery resident traveling with the group, read the preflight safety briefing in Arabic. Members of the crew reassured nervous passengers that the oxygen masks were only necessary in case of emergency.

The passengers recited a brief prayer as the plane began to taxi.

“We’re asking God for safe passage to Iraq,” explained one of the parents.

The prayer was repeated several times with increasing urgency and volume as the plane accelerated down the runway and lifted off. One Iraqi woman quietly fingered her prayer beads and hugged her daughter tightly as the plane began its rapid ascent.

“This is turning out to be a rewarding mission,” said Lt. Col. Chris Carlsen, the aircraft commander. “You see all the children with the smiles on their faces. I’m glad to be a part of this. It’s a historic and beneficial event for the Iraqi people.”

Airman 1st Class Alexis Elliott, a loadmaster for the C-17, agreed.

“It makes me feel like I’m really helping to do something important,” said Elliott, who is on her first deployment with the Air Force.

As the plane landed, taxied and came to a halt at Baghdad International Airport’s passenger terminal, the faces of the Iraqi children and their parents explained very clearly what Operation Smile is all about. One jubilant father exited the plane, dropped to his knees and kissed the ground, although it was not clear whether he was celebrating his return to Iraq or just happy to be back on solid ground.

Chris Anderson, International Development Manager for Operation Smile’s Middle East Region, accompanied the flight and commented, “The bottom line is that the military is really trying to do what it can to help. The support was a great match for us.”

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“Everyone Played a Role”

Operation Smile CEO and Co-founder, Dr. Bill Magee, acknowledged the selfless teamwork of many in saying, “I would like to thank the countless individuals who contributed a part in setting the stage for this ultimate transformational moment to take place. The can-do spirit exhibited by so many and the groundwork that had been laid by others before them ensured a positive outcome for these deserving patients, their families and medical escorts. Everyone played a role and one act of kindness simply built upon the other when it was most needed.”

Upon the group’s arrival by bus into Amman for the start of the medical mission on April 20, officials began the search for alternative transportation for the return trip into Baghdad on April 29. Operation Smile Board of Governor’s member and motivational speaker Dan Clark was speaking to a group of Air Force personnel and was prompted to ask Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Gerald Murray for assistance in Amman. Next, Operation Smile officials, including Chief Operating Officer Wayne Zinn, also spoke with Master Sergeant Murray and then briefed General T. Michael Mosely, Air Force Chief of Staff. Support from General Mosely led Operation Smile to approach Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld for authorization to use Air Force aircraft and personnel to provide a safe return to their homeland for these individuals.

Letters of support from members of both the House and Senate bolstered Operation Smile’s request for assistance. The joint request was made possible by letters from Congressman Trent Franks, Congresswoman Thelma Drake, Congressman Jim Moran, Senator John Warner, Senator George Allen, and Senator Mary Landrieu. The Washington law and lobbying firm Patton Boggs provided pro bono services coordinating collection of the letters.

Commenting on the team effort, Anderson stated, “After landing, I was reminded of the magnitude of seemingly simple deeds, as the parents expressed not only relief but elation to be safely at home with a new hope for their children, and the faces and comments from the crew showed that the men and women of our armed forces are committed to improving the lives of the men, women and children of Iraq.”

The program is part of an ongoing effort to treat Iraqi children and to provide medical education and training for Iraqi medical professionals that has been funded in part by a grant from the State Department Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. To date, 245 patients have traveled to Amman, Jordan, to receive free reconstructive surgeries during Operation Smile Jordan medical missions held at Jameel Totanji Hospital in Sahab, Jordan. The teams have consisted of volunteer medical professionals from around the world who donated their time and talents to help these children and their families, already living in desperate circumstances, have some chance at gaining normal lives in the future.

About Operation Smile, Inc.

Operation Smile, Inc., headquartered in Norfolk, Virginia, was founded in 1982 by Dr. William P. Magee Jr., a plastic surgeon and his wife, Kathleen, a nurse and clinical social worker. Operation Smile volunteers have traveled to 30 developing countries over the last 24 years, partnering with local physicians and institutions in order to build a legacy of trust, hope, health and dignity for more than 98,000 patients hoping for a chance at a normal life. Medical volunteers repair childhood facial deformities while building public and private partnerships that advocate for sustainable healthcare systems for children and families. For more information, visit www.operationsmile.org

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PHOTO CUTLINES:

Smile 1

An Iraqi boy thanks Christopher Anderson of Operation Smile after deplaning a U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III at Baghdad International Airport, Iraq, April 29. On Saturday, the United States Air Force assisted Operation Smile in returning patients and their families to Iraq from Jordan, where the patients had received surgery. (U.S. Air Force Photograph by Master Sgt. Will Ackerman)



Smile 2

060428-F-1212A-001 Iraqi children and their escorts deplane a U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III at Baghdad International Airport, Iraq, April 29 as Chris Anderson, an Operation Smile staff member based in the Middle East looks on. On Saturday, the United States Air Force assisted Operation Smile in returning patients and their families to Iraq from Jordan, where the patients had received surgery. (U.S. Air Force Photograph by Master Sgt. Will Ackerman)



Smile 3

060428-F-1212A-002 An Iraqi girl plays while waiting to deplane a U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III at Baghdad International Airport, Iraq, April 29. On Saturday, the United States Air Force assisted Operation Smile in returning patients and their families to Iraq from Jordan, where the patients had received surgery. (U.S. Air Force Photograph by Master Sgt. Will Ackerman)



Smile 4

060428-F-4242P-001 Amn 1st Class Alexis Elliott, a C-17 loadmaster, greets Operation Smile passengers as one young Iraqi patient is awed by the cavernous cabin of the cargo aircraft. Operation Smile is a non-governmental organization that treats children for cleft palate and cleft lip, a congenital birth defect. On Saturday, the United States Air Force assisted Operation Smile in returning patients and their families to Iraq from Jordan, where the patients had received surgery. (U.S. Air Force Photograph by Maj. Robert Palmer)



Smile 5

060428-F-4242P-002 Amn 1st Class Alexis Elliott, a C-17 loadmaster, helps Dr. Talib, a plastic surgery resident, give the preflight safety briefing in Arabic for the Iraqi children and parents of Operation Smile. Operation Smile is a non-governmental organization that treats children for cleft palate and cleft lip, a congenital birth defect. On Saturday, the United States Air Force assisted Operation Smile in returning patients and their families to Iraq from Jordan, where the patients had received surgery. (U.S. Air Force Photograph by Maj. Robert Palmer)

