

Israeli eye doctors make delta tour

By Gabrielle Paluch

NATI Marcus can remember the day his life – and, subsequently, the lives of thousands of people around the world – changed.

“Four years ago, I was just a normal person,” Mr Marcus, from Israel, said. “I went to a cocktail party and was talking to an eye doctor and then he told me about how easy it is, how little it costs, to make a big difference [in developing countries].”

He decided to form an NGO, named it Eye from Zion, and has since taken groups of eye specialists to Tibet, Vietnam and Azerbaijan, where they performed free operations for locals.

“Our primary goals are to provide medical care, medical training, and to be goodwill ambassadors of Israel, so that people know that we care,” Mr Marcus said.

“Now so many wonderful people have joined [the group], like [photographer] Vardi Kahana – my life has changed.”

Last month, a seven-person Eye from Zion team, comprised of four eye doctors, medical technician Hovav Nuttman, Ms Kahana and Mr Marcus, performed free operations at hospitals in Pyapon and Mandalay, gave lectures at Yangon Eye Hospital and contributed medical equipment.

Over three days Eye from Zion specialists treated 67 patients, mostly for cataracts. However, there were some more serious eye conditions, including one patient with a tumour, that warranted plastic surgery.

“We could really tell we were improving people’s lives, especially in Pyapon” said Dr Nirit Bourla. “You could tell they really needed the operations. And there were some surgeries [plastic surgeon] Dr Levartovsky did that

treated life-threatening conditions.”

A team of local doctors working with Eye from Zion treated an additional 120 patients, including 55-year-old U Unt Kwe from Mandalay’s Sein Pann Quarter.

“I heard about the delegation while I was in the hospital getting my eyes tested,” U Unt Kwe said. “I am very grateful for this free eye surgery program.”

Daw Mya Tin from Mandalay’s Aung Pin Lel Quarter, said she read about the delegation in local journal *Yadanarbon*.

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opportunity,” she said shortly before going into surgery.

Dr Aung Kyaw Myint, who coordinated the project on behalf of the Israeli embassy, said: “I’m glad that there can be such a mission doing things for free for people in an area where there is need.”

At the opening ceremony on November 17 in Pyapon, Health Minister Dr Kyaw Myint said in Myanmar cataracts are the main cause of blindness.

“To achieve the national objective of reducing the blindness rate to less than 0.5 percent, the Ministry of Health has established new eye care centres equipped with microscopic and surgical facilities,” he said, adding that the ministry is providing free cataract surgery to poor patients

and implementing outreach programs in remote areas, to enable people to have the “right to sight”.

Israeli ambassador to Myanmar Yaron Mayer said the first part of the project took place in August 2009, when Myanmar ophthalmologists Dr Sandar Thein and Dr Ohmmar Myint travelled to Israel to train under Dr Tzvi Segal at his hospital in Tel-Aviv.

“They came to Israel and trained with me, and they are very, very good doctors,” Dr Segal said.

Ms Kahana, a photographer for the weekend supplement of Israel’s most widely read newspaper, *Yediot Ahronoth*, was on hand to take portraits of patients before and after their surgeries for a planned exhibition in Israel.

“It’s very moving to see,” Kahana said, “People getting to see for the first time, you can see them smile, and see how good they feel. It’s a wonderful feeling for us, too.”

An online journal of the mission, written by Dr Bourla and accompanied by Ms Kahana’s photographs, will be published on the Israeli news website *Ynet*, she said.

“I hope we can return soon to Myanmar,” Ms Kahana said on the group’s last evening in Myanmar. “There are so many stories here, and we could tell that there really was a need for the work that we do.”

“The hospitality we were shown was truly unparalleled, I hope this isn’t the last time we come,” Mr Nuttman agreed.

The Eye from Zion delegation was funded by Mashav (Israel’s Agency for International Development Cooperation), the Israeli Red Cross, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Hellen Keller Foundation and private donors, including the doctors on the trip.



Top: Dr Levartovsky (right) examines a patient with a tumour close to his eye. Middle: A patient waits for surgery at Pyapon Hospital. Bottom: After surgery, a patient tries to look underneath a bandage covering her eye. Pics: Gabrielle Paluch