

In Sadr City, civilians turn to U.S. medics

By Michael R. Gordon
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BAGHDAD: Shortly before 1 o'clock the other morning, there was a desperate wail at the back gate of B Company's compound in Sadr City. A woman had been badly burned and her relatives were begging for help.

With little in the way of emergency services and travel hampered by blocked streets, nightly curfews and sporadic firefights, a steady trickle of Iraqis has been turning to U.S. soldiers here for medical care.

Medics who have trained for combat have attended to a seizure victim, an infant brought in by an anxious father and a boy wounded by gunfire. On Thursday, they cared for the burned woman, Samera Tula, who had been seared over much of her body when a propane tank accidentally exploded.

Providing care to Iraqi civilians and Iraqi soldiers "has been the excitement of being here so far," said Specialist Joshua Bosley, one of the medics here.

Wednesday had been a relatively quiet day at the base for the company, which is part of the 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment. The U.S. military moved into Sadr City, the huge Shiite slum in Baghdad, to try to stop the rocket attacks on the Green Zone and help the Iraqi government establish order.

The military had organized a clinic that lasted several hours and was staffed by several Iraqi doctors. The U.S. medics were available to help in case of an emergency but did not participate. The calculation was that using an all-Iraqi medical staff would build the confidence of Sadr City residents in the Iraqi government.

More than 300 Iraqis showed up for treatment. In many cases, the care consisted of little more than a two-minute consultation and the dispensing of a packet of pills. But the residents in Thawra, an impoverished warren in Sadr City, were grateful to have received that much.

By midafternoon, the clinic was over, the Iraqi doctors were gone and the U.S. medics once again were the only health providers in the neighborhood.

The medics have been working out of an armored vehicle that is specially configured as an ambulance. The vehicle is equipped with four stretchers, oxygen and medical supplies, but no weapon system.

As a precaution against insurgent attacks that sometimes target ambulances, the medics have unbolted the distinguishing red cross from the side of their Stryker. They also stopped carrying medic aid bags so that they would not be singled out by enemy snipers. The medics carry M-4 rifles and M-9 pistols for self-defense, but are not outfitted with heavy arms like machine guns.

Before the medics came to Sadr City a month ago, they spent much of their time attending to U.S. soldiers with diarrhea and other ailments. Being posted in Sadr City, however, has been different. In a month of fighting, the company's medics say they have treated just two injured Americans, who were hurt when a roadside bomb exploded. They have spent much more of their time patching up Iraqi soldiers with gunshot wounds and other injuries and have responded to the needs of civilians.

U.S. soldiers have been killed and wounded here: one was wounded in the face by a stray round just the other day. But Iraqi troops are deployed in front of U.S. forces, and civilians have sometimes been caught in the cross-fire.

Thursday presented the medics with one of their hardest cases. A group of Iraqis gathered outside the concrete wall of the U.S. compound and screamed for help.

A Stryker vehicle blocking the entrance to the U.S. base pulled back, and several Iraqi men and women rushed in with a pushcart covered by blankets. An Iraqi woman in a black abaya raised her arms imploringly to the sky and prayed for help.

The U.S. soldiers were torn by a desire to help and fear that a suicide bomber might have set a nefarious trap. As the blankets were pulled back, however, the face of a woman emerged, her hair singed and her teeth ashen with soot.

The Americans got on the radio and asked the Iraqi Army to send an ambulance. Meanwhile, the woman was lifted onto a stretcher and brought to the medics' Stryker.

Private 1st Class William Spencer Jr. and Sergeant Kevin Stine went to work under the light of Captain Logan Veath's head-mounted flashlight. Veath cut the bandages while the medics started an IV and began swathing the victim's arms and legs.

As the medics rushed to treat the woman, trying to pull back the blankets that covered her, she struggled to cover up. The soldiers explained through an interpreter that this was no time for modesty. Some of her female relatives held their black abayas out from their bodies to create a screen against onlookers as the Americans wrapped her limbs in bandages.

But there was only so much the medics could do. The woman needed care at a hospital burn clinic. After 20 minutes, two Iraqi soldiers arrived from the front line to transport her to a hospital. There was no ambulance. All they had was an armored Humvee. It would have to do.

A Humvee door was tied open to accommodate the long stretcher. The rear cargo compartment was opened and two of her relatives climbed in. The Humvee drove into the night.

As morning broke, a father brought in a baby, complaining that the infant had vomited. Specialist Chad Gentry checked the infant's vital signs and assured the man that the baby would be fine.

Spencer, 20, said he was glad to help residents but was surprised by his tour in Sadr City.

"I did not think I would be treating too many civilians," he said. "I thought it would be military."