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World's neediest kids suffer in recession

By Marisol Bello, USA TODAY

Two-month-old Joshua Teck was born without a fully formed esophagus.

When he ate, food and bile infected his lungs because his esophagus didn't connect from his throat to his stomach. His family, from a remote village in Belize, was too poor to pay for life-saving surgery. At 1-month old, he weighed 4 pounds.

Last month, the International Hospital for Children, a charity that brings poor children to the U.S. for treatment, flew Joshua to the Virginia Commonwealth University Health Systems in Richmond, where surgeons repaired his esophagus.

"They are God's angels," his mother, Yesenia Quetzal, 20, says in Spanish. "In time, he would have died. He would have starved to death."

Yet help for children such as Joshua is in jeopardy.

The recession is battering organizations that provide medical treatment to children in developing countries, forcing several groups to treat fewer children as they scale back medical missions and limit hospital care.

"The recession will exacerbate the burden borne by the world's children," says Maurice Middleberg, vice president for public policy for the Global Health Council, which represents 500 health care groups working in poor countries. "The danger in times of economic hardship is that children with no voice and who are not visible will get forgotten."

Each year, 9 million children worldwide die before their fifth birthday, according to UNICEF, a U.N. agency that provides children's aid. Most live in developing countries and die from preventable or easily treatable diseases, the agency says.

The International Hospital for Children, based in Richmond, will lower the number of children it brings to the United States from 40 this year to 32 to 35, President Susan Rickman says. A drop in donations is expected to decrease its budget from \$1.8 million to \$1.5 million when its fiscal year begins July 1, Rickman says.

Lemoyne, Pa.-based CURE International, which maintains children's hospitals in 10 countries, scaled back services as donations fell by 14% this year, says Lisa Wolf, vice president of communications and donor relations.

Its Afghanistan hospital dropped from 100 beds to 90. Its Zambia hospital cut its budget by 48%, reducing planned surgeries from 2,000 to 1,200.

Variety Children's Lifeline International, based in Solana Beach, Calif., sends medical teams to 22 countries. It is funding 30 missions this year, down from 40 last year.

Minneapolis-based Children's HeartLink, which provides training and funding for pediatric heart programs in nine countries, is limiting the grants it gives hospitals overseas because fewer donations contributed to a \$150,000 deficit as it closes its fiscal year on June 30.

Groups such as the Millwood, Va.-based Project HOPE, which provides maternal and child health care, and the Norfolk, Va.-based Operation Smile, which treats children with facial deformities, laid off staff in their main offices and trimmed administrative costs to avoid service cuts overseas.

"This has slowed us down but not stopped us," says Elizabeth Bickel, president of Children's HeartLink. "These children are dying. ... The need is greater than ever."

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