



## **PESHAWAR PROJECT**

### **History**

With the invasion, on the 27<sup>th</sup> December 1979, of USSR troops, Afghanistan enters in an era of almost a quarter of century of armed conflicts and foreign occupation. Millions of Afghans, fleeing the lethal hardships of the war, begin by successive waves to settle for numerous years in Pakistan. The international community starts its works to provide humanitarian assistance to the refugees.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1985, a new French NGO, launched by three volunteers involved in humanitarian assistance to Afghan refugees, is born in Paris: CRMA (Cours de Recyclage pour Médecins Afghans) – the French name for MRCA (Medical Refresher Courses for Afghans) –, with the objective of promoting the training of Afghan health personnel through the provision of theoretical and practical courses given by expatriate volunteers, within the premises of an hospital located in Peshawar.

### **MRCA opens a Training Hospital in Peshawar in April 1986**

The first hospital run by MRCA opens in April 1986 in Peshawar (Pakistan). It is located on G.T. Road in the premises of a former two-floor caravanserai. The 28-bed hospital provides medical, surgery, physiotherapy and dental services to Afghan refugees living in the camps nearby Peshawar as well as to patients coming from inside Afghanistan (sometimes after traveling for weeks). The hospital is under the direct responsibility of an expatriate Director, one of the three volunteers who founded the Association. There are four expatriates in the medical team (1 surgeon, 1 anesthetist nurse, 1 physiotherapist and 1 dental surgeon), eight Afghans and one Pakistani. There is 18 administrative and ancillary staff. Equipment is purchased locally or donated in Europe and transported to Pakistan. The aim of the first trainings is to provide refresher courses in surgery. Most of students are introduced by NGOs working in the area.

### **MRCA Hospital moves to Hayatabad in 1989**

In August 1986, based upon the work done by 3 European NGOs<sup>1</sup>, the project of building a Training Center for Afghan refugees is approved and funded by the Commission of European Communities (CEC). The construction of the 2000 square meters Integrated Training Center (ITC) – designed by the French NGO Architectes Sans Frontières – starts beginning of 1987 on a 8000 square meters land – lent by the Government of the Pakistani North West Frontier Province (NWFP) –, located in Hayatabad in the suburbs of Peshawar. In February 1989, MRCA hospital moves to ITC premises, along with four other projects that join gradually the ITC, all dedicated to training: MTA, SGAA, TTC/PMT and ASYAR<sup>2</sup>.

The MRCA hospital provides surgery and dental services. MRCA runs two operation theaters, one surgery OPD room, one dressing room, one pharmacy, one (the second will open in 1992) dental unit, and nine rooms for patients, representing a 40-bed capacity for the hospital. In October 1989, agreement is signed with the

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<sup>1</sup> Solidarité Afghanistan, MRCA & AMI (Aide Médical Internationale).

<sup>2</sup> MTA: Medical Training for Afghans (run by AMI and Solidarité Afghanistan Belgique); SGAA: Sandy Gall Afghanistan Appeal, United Kingdom; TTC/PMT: Teacher Training Program & Pedagogic Mobile Team (run by Solidarité Afghanistan Belgique); ASYAR: Apprentice Scheme for Young Afghan Refugees (run by Solidarité Afghanistan Belgique).

German NGO INTERPLAST, specialized in rehabilitative and plastic surgery, laying the foundations of years of fruitful cooperation.

There are five expatriates (director, surgeon, anesthetist M.D., operation theater nurse, and ward nurse), and 16 Afghans (12 paramedical, 2 administrative, 2 ancillary) working for MRCA Projects. Other ancillary staff (guards, cooks, sweepers, etc) is shared between the NGOs of the ITC Consortium.

MRCA develops 10 different types of initial and refresher trainings, in surgery, anesthesia, dressing, dental and X-Ray. Many students are coming from all provinces of Afghanistan; most of them are returning to Afghanistan after courses are completed.

With the departure of USSR occupation troops in February 1989 begins another cycle of violence with the civil war. Heavy fighting for power and for the possession of the capital city between the different factions of the Afghan resistance leads to the destruction of Kabul. New waves of refugees including high-level personnel of the university and the hospitals flee from Kabul to Peshawar. This enables MRCA to hire very qualified staff and make the major decision, beginning of 1994, to have expatriates in the medical field only for specific and limited missions as advisors to their Afghan counterparts. A further step is taken mid 1995 with the appointment of an Afghan General Director supported by an expatriate Advisor.

### **MRCA Hospital services expand mid-1994, but hospital is closed in January 1996 for 9 months**

In June 1994, MRCA opens a 20-bed Pediatrics Department (5 of them dedicated to re-hydration and ventilation) – the only structure of that kind in the NWFP –, thanks to HELP HOLLAND funding. Capacity of the hospital rises to 60 beds. In August 1994, MRCA opens its own Laboratory Unit within the hospital. Protocols for the treatment of pediatrics and gynecological cases are drafted and validated. All MRCA training curriculum are reviewed and sent as resource material to the Institute of Intermediate Medical Training (IIMT) in Kabul.

Unfortunately, due to funding problems linked to the fact that the new policy of the donors is to stop gradually funding refugees' projects and therefore push the NGOs to relocate their activities inside Afghanistan, MRCA has to make the decision of closing the hospital. All the equipments are shifted in a rented building in town in December 1995, keeping just a small administrative cell, and the personnel is dismissed. One of the operation theater equipment is sent to Kabul for the future RSU Unit in Maiwand Hospital.

### **MRCA Hospital re-opens in October 1996, but closes during summer 1999 for 3 months**

Due to the political situation in Afghanistan, with the hard line Taliban faction imposing a very restrictive "Islamic" way of life in the cities they were taking over one after the other, the donors change their mind. Refugees' projects are reactivated and MRCA Hospital re-opens in October 1996 in its former building in Hayatabad, with a capacity of 25 beds, all dedicated to the most vulnerable group of refugees, women and children. With the new waves of refugees pouring into NWFP, the camps have to be extended, and ancient camps are reopened. The next two years during which funding can be secured, and despite heavy litigation with the Pakistan electricity company – which switched off the electrical power for six months – capacity is increased to 55 beds, and health care services and training are provided. The MRCA hospital is the sole health facility located in the Peshawar area that is providing in-patient care in pediatrics to Afghan refugees. MRCA Hospital also provides surgery (general, urology, orthopedics, ear-nose-throat (ENT) and neurosurgery), dental, physiotherapy and health education, supported by laboratory and radiography Units.

In 1998, health care activity increases by 40%, as many health centers located in refugees' camps are closing. MRCA launches a mobile Basic Health Unit (BHU) for OPDs in Akhuri Khattak camps. Severe cases are referred to the hospital. Training activity increases by 185%. MRCA is now providing 18 types of medical training in 8 different specialties. MRCA sets-up computerized Health Information System (HIS).

Unfortunately, due to a misuse of European Union (EU) funding by some NGOs, all EU funds for all NGOs in all countries are frozen in autumn 1998. MRCA is therefore obliged to slow down its activity – only OPDs are made by volunteer staff without salary –, then to close the Hospital between June and August 1999.

## MRCA Hospital re-opens in August 1999

MRCA Hospital re-opens in August 1999, thanks to a 2-year contract signed with the European Commission (EC)<sup>3</sup>. In 1999, there are as many as 3,5 millions of refugees in Pakistan, a significant amount of them in the NWFP camps. MRCA re-organizes the hospital Departments and increases again the capacity of the hospital up to 55 beds. MRCA now provides gynecology, obstetric, pediatrics, nutrition rehabilitation and growth monitoring, ear-nose-throat (ENT), orthopedics, general surgery, urology, dentistry, immunization and health education services. The hospital has three well-equipped operation theaters and the required supporting services such as laboratory, EKG, ultrasound, radiography and blood bank.

There are 92 employees (6 administrative, 21 medical, 39 paramedical and 26 supporting staff), all Afghan, since the decision strengthened in 1998 to run the hospital at all levels, including administration, only with afghan staff. More than 60 % of the employees are women.

On May 14, 2001, on invitation of the Head of European Commission (EC) Delegation in Peshawar, a delegation of 14 Ambassadors of European countries pay official visit to the MRCA Hospital, chosen as the most exemplary of the EC funded projects for afghan refugees, and congratulate the staff for their commitment.

In spring 2002, hundred thousands of refugees begin to return to Afghanistan, under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) voluntary repatriation program. Donors advise MRCA a few months later that their funding will not be available in the near future for Projects dedicated to refugees in Pakistan<sup>4</sup>. MRCA opens an Office in Kabul. Administration and Finance Departments are gradually shifted from Peshawar to Kabul.

The hospital capacity is now 85 beds (40 beds in Pediatrics, 25 beds in Surgery, and 20 beds in gynecology/obstetrics IPDs). It is the only one to continue providing in-patient care services to the Afghan refugees in the Peshawar area. The Pediatrics Department is developed: there are now nutrition/rehabilitation, re-hydration/ventilation and intensive care Units (20 beds) in that Department, mainly funded by the French Ministry of Foreign Affaires (MAE).

In August 2004, MRCA closes the Peshawar Hospital/Training Center Project that was dedicated to Afghan refugees for as many as 18 years, and shifts all the remaining equipment to Afghanistan. ITC premises are handed over to the Pakistani Ministry of Health.

It must be noted here that, during the 2-year 1999-2001 EC contract, the MRCA Project catchment's area is more than 1 million people, and that the total amount of direct beneficiaries is close to 185 000, for less than 5 € cost per capita. During the last 30 months, there are more than 350 000 direct beneficiaries and the cost per capita is reduced below 3 €.

### **In 18 years almost 450 000 patients received health care and 1 800 health workers were trained**

In 18 years, almost 450 000 patients attended the MRCA Peshawar Hospital/Training Center for medical treatment. More than 38 000 patients were hospitalized and more than 20 000 surgical operations were performed in different specialties. More than 104 000 dental interventions, 29 000 physiotherapy, 330 000 lab exams, 54 000 X-rays were performed. Almost 350 000 people were provided with health education.

More than 1 800 health workers were trained in 18 different training courses in 8 specialties.

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<sup>3</sup> It is the first time for MRCA that EC grants a contract for more than one year.

<sup>4</sup> EC, as well as the French Ministry of Foreign Affaires (MAE), will continue to provide funding to the MRCA Hospital Project in Peshawar until August 2004, when the hospital is definitively closed.