

Transcript: USNS Comfort Wraps Up Continuing Promise 2009

THE SCENE COULD PASS FOR A STREET FAIR. VENDORS WORK THE CROWD SELLING COLD DRINKS, SNACKS AND FRUIT. SKINNY, STRAY DOGS SLIP THROUGH THE LEGS OF THE CROWD, LOOKING FOR A DROPPED TREAT. BABIES CLING TO THEIR MOTHERS, BIGGER CHILDREN KICK AN EMPTY PLASTIC SODA BOTTLE BACK AND FORTH ACROSS THE COBBLESTONE.

A LOCAL DISK JOCKEY BLASTS A MIX OF CURRENT HIP HOP HITS AND LOCAL LATIN AMERICAN MUSIC.

BUT DESPITE THE FESTIVE ATMOSPHERE, THE HUNDREDS GATHERED IN THIS COASTAL NICARAGUAN TOWN OF CHINENDAGA ARE HERE FOR A VERY SERIOUS REASON.

THEY ALL WANT TO SEE A DOCTOR.

THE UNITED STATES NAVAL HOSPITAL SHIP, THE COMFORT IS CIRCLING JUST OFF SHORE ABOUT 12 MILES FROM HERE. ITS HEALTHCARE STAFF HAS COME ASHORE TO TREAT AS MANY LOCALS AS THEY CAN BEFORE THEIR MISSION ENDS.

THE COMFORT HAS BEEN ON A FOUR-MONTH HUMANITARIAN TREK TO SEVEN COUNTRIES IN CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA.

IN EACH COUNTRY LOCALS HAVE TURNED OUT BY THE THOUSANDS, PACKING INTO THE MAKESHIFT MEDICAL SITES. FOR MANY, THIS IS THEIR FIRST, AND SOMETIMES LAST, TIME IN FRONT OF A PHYSICIAN, NURSE, DENTIST OR EYE DOCTOR.

"I FEEL THAT THIS ABSOLUTELY THE MOST IMPORTANT [MISSION] I'VE EVER BEEN INVOLVED IN. THE TANGIBILITY OF OUR WORK IS SO

INCREDIBLE," SAID NAVY CAPT. TOM NEGUS, THE MISSION COMMANDER.

SOME OF THE PATIENTS ARE SEEN BY SURGEONS ON THE SHIP, BUT MOST ARE TREATED ON SHORE AT SITES SUCH AS THIS ONE. THE HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS ARE FLOWN TO THE SITES BY HELICOPTER, OR SHUTTLED ON SMALL BOATS.

CHINENDAGA IS THE COMFORT'S FINAL STOP. THE SHIP RETURNS TO ITS HOME PORT OF BALTIMORE IN EARLY AUGUST.

DURING THE PAST FOUR MONTHS, THE COMFORT'S HEALTHCARE STAFF HAS TREATED MORE THAN 100,000 PATIENTS. ITS SURGEONS CONDUCTED MORE THAN 1,600 OPERATIONS ABOARD THE FLOATING HOSPITAL WARD. MORE THAN 135,000 PRESCRIPTIONS WERE FILLED.

BEYOND DIRECT MEDICAL AID, DOCTORS AND NURSES SET UP 1,300 TRAINING SESSIONS FOR MORE THAN 37,000 HOST-NATION STUDENTS. VETERINARIANS CARED FOR MORE THAN 13,000 ANIMALS. ENGINEERS TOOK ON 13 PROJECTS, HELPING REBUILD SCHOOLS AND THE LIKE.

OFFICIALLY NAMED CONTINUING PROMISE 2009, THIS MISSION, HAS FAR REACHING IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. NATIONAL DEFENSE STRATEGY.

THE COMFORT AND ITS CREW SERVE ON THE FRONT LINES OF THE UNITED STATE'S SOFT POWER EFFORTS. AND THE SHIP HAS EFFECTIVELY CHARTED THE COURSE FOR ALIGNING THE U.S. MILITARY WITH HUMANITARIAN GROUPS, FOREIGN MILITARIES AND POLITICAL BUREAUCRACIES AT HOME AND ABROAD IN A SYNCHRONIZED EFFORT TO PROVIDE HEALTHCARE TO SOME OF THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE'S POOREST COUNTRIES.

THE COMFORT'S MISSION WAS SUPPORTED BY NEARLY 20 CIVILIAN HUMANITARIAN GROUPS OFFERING UP HUNDREDS OF VOLUNTEERS. DOCTORS

AND NURSES FROM 10 NATIONS, NEARLY 100 MEDICAL PROVIDERS, ALSO JOINED ITS EFFORTS.

"MY SENSE IS THIS IS THE FUTURE OF OPERATIONS," NEGUS SAID. "IF WE AS A NATION ARE GOING TO HOPE TO HAVE AN EFFECT, THEN WE ARE GOING TO OPERATE IN AN ARENA LIKE THIS, WITH [NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS] AND PARTNER NATIONS ... ALL COLLABORATING, ALL FOCUSED ON ACHIEVING A PURPOSE, HAVING THAT ALIGNMENT, THAT UNITY OF MISSION."

BUT THE IMPACT OF THE \$25-MILLION MISSION CANNOT EFFECTIVELY BE MEASURED IN TERMS OF GROSS NUMBERS. ITS POWER IS MANIFESTED IN THOSE WHOSE LIFE IT CHANGES, SAID MANY OF THOSE WORKING ON THE SHIP.

TWO-YEAR-OLD BEYKER MALDONADO CELEBRATED HIS BIRTHDAY ABOARD THE COMFORT.

THE BOY'S GRANDMOTHER HAD PLANNED A PARTY, BUT INSTEAD, BEYKER SPENT THE NIGHT ABOARD WITH HIS MOTHER PREPARING FOR EYE SURGERY.

A FEW MONTHS AGO, BEYKER'S RIGHT EYE STARTED CROSSING TOWARD HIS LEFT. NOW HE HAS TROUBLE FOCUSING ON AND GRABBING THINGS. WITHOUT THE SURGERY, BEYKER WOULD LIKELY DO POORLY AT WHAT LITTLE EDUCATION IS OFFERED HERE. AND HIS JOB PROSPECTS AS AN ADULT WOULD BE LIMITED. NICARAGUA IS THE SECOND POOREST COUNTRY IN THE REGION, AND BEYKER LIKELY WOULD HAVE BEEN AMONG THE POOREST.

FOR AMERICAN FORCES PRESS SERVICE IN NICARAGUA IM FRED BAKER