

Lutheran hospital caught in Palestinian monetary dilemma: Christian donors provide short-term aid

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Jerusalem's Augusta Victoria Hospital, a facility that treats Palestinian residents from the West Bank as well as some Arabs from East Jerusalem, has a million-dollar view from its perch atop the Mount of Olives.

Built in 1910 by Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II, the stone building affords a heart-stopping vista of the Old City of Jerusalem, whose ancient walls gently slope into the contours of the hills and valleys below. Sunlight glints off the gold-topped Dome of the Rock, built on the contested Temple Mount.

But Augusta Victoria, which is owned and operated by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), has been on an emergency footing since January, the last time the cash-starved Palestinian Authority was able to pay its debts.

The hospital relied on the Palestinian government's insurance payments for 40 percent of its operating budget. The facility has been living on credit with suppliers.

"We're in a difficult situation, even though we're receiving help from churches around the world," said Mark Brown, a minister who is the LWF's regional representative in Jerusalem, referring to an emergency international appeal on the hospital's behalf. "There are facilities in even worse shape."

The Palestinian Authority owes huge sums of money to numerous hospitals, schools and clinics, which are scrambling to make up the shortfall without sacrificing vital services. Augusta Victoria, like other humanitarian institutions, has been caught in the middle.

The crisis began when several Western governments, including the U.S. and the European Union, decided to withhold hundreds of millions of dollars from the Palestinian Authority after Hamas scored a resounding victory in last January's elections. The governments fear that Hamas, which has perpetrated numerous suicide bombings, could use the money to sponsor terrorism.

Prior to the Hamas win, about a quarter of the Palestinian Authority's gross disposable income came from donor countries. Much of that aid paid the salaries of 160,000 civil servants and helped support medical care and other services.

Members of the "Quartet"—the U.S., Russia, the UN and the European Union—decided May 9 to establish a fund to pay impoverished government employees. They say they are finalizing plans to send money through alternative channels, but no one knows when or how the funds will reach the people who need them most. (A June 3 Reuters story quoting a U.S. State Department official visiting Kuwait said that plans should be finished before the end of June.)

"I frankly don't know how people are living," said Noah Salameh, director of the Center for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, an interfaith organization in Bethlehem. "Without money coming in from the government, without salaries, people are beginning to starve. By the time the donor countries figure out how to distribute the money by bypassing Hamas, a lot of people could die."

Augusta Victoria has been able to provide virtually the same level of care it always has, thanks to donations from Christians around the world.

“When we realized a crisis was looming, we contacted Action by Churches Together”—a worldwide network of churches and related agencies—“and it put out an appeal on our behalf,” explained Dr. Tawfiq Nasser, the hospital’s CEO.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada responded with a \$50,000 grant, while Lutheran World Relief, the relief arm of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, donated another \$75,000. Other churches and agencies have also responded, Nasser said, “but we don’t yet know the amount.” The ELCA separately donated \$100,000, said a LWR spokesperson.

Regardless of how much Christian supporters donate to the hospital, “it cannot cover our long-term or even short-term deficit,” Nasser said. “We need to buy chemotherapy drugs, dialysis supplies, reagents. Some of our staff have left. Our donors have been very good, but we have very major debts to deal with.”

While Nasser applauded the distribution of \$800,000 worth of dialysis supplies and medicine to Palestinian hospitals by the U.S. Agency for International Development as part of a \$10 million emergency pledge by the Americans, “we need much more,” the administrator said.

The Hamas victory “has created an ethical dilemma,” acknowledged ELCA presiding bishop Mark Hanson, the president of the Lutheran World Federation. “The challenge for us as a religious aid organization is to find a way to continue the flow of aid to the Palestinian people while facilitating a lasting, just, two-state solution.”

Hanson said he is “appalled” that the Bush administration, the EU and other donor countries “haven’t yet created a vehicle to ensure the flow of humanitarian aid to the 60 percent of Palestinians living below the poverty level.”
– *Michele Chabin, Religion News Service*