

Cecilia Strada. Hopes for the Re-Opening of the Emergency Hospital in Lashkar Gah

Maria Caspani (May 21, 2010)



Cecilia Strada speaks about the re-opening of the 'Emergency' hospital in Lashkar Gah (Afghanistan). In April 'Emergency' decided to leave the hospital after the arrest of three medical operators accused of taking part in a plot to assassinate the governor of Helmand, Gulab Mangal.

The Italian medical charity [Emergency](#) [2] could soon reopen its hospital in Lashkar Gah, the capital of the war-torn Afghan province of Helmand. "We participated in some informal talks with the local authorities and it appears they will ask us to get back to work", said in an interview Cecilia Strada, president of the charity.

"We have treated 66,000 people in Lashkar Gah, it is where we are most needed. The only public hospital is closed in the afternoon because it does not have enough trained workers to cope with all the patients and the treatment is not free. Many Afghans are now taking a 600 km journey to our



Kabul medical centre. I believe it is in the governor's own interest for the hospital to reopen as soon as possible, he certainly wouldn't want to be accused of depriving people of their right to be treated."

Strada's father and executive director of the charity, Gino, will soon go to Afghanistan to discuss the future of the aid agency in the region.

On April 10 three Italians and six Afghans aid workers were arrested in Lashkar Gah and they were accused by Helmand's provincial authorities of taking part in a scheme to assassinate the governor and plotting "terroristic activities". All the charges were dropped and the volunteers were released after eight days in prison. Nonetheless the episode led to controversy over the charity's operations in the country, on how they handled the negotiations and the hospital has been shut down since then.

"From what I've been reading in newspapers over the past month, I got the impression the effort Emergency made in freeing its aid workers in Lashkar Gah was seen as some sort of intelligence operation to free war hostages. Our intervention was the logical response to the detention that was never officially explained by the Afghan authorities".

According to Strada, Emergency still hasn't received an official clarification from Helmand's governor or anyone who is entitled to provide such an explanation.

"We won't accept the governor's spokesperson reasoning which has been publicized in the papers. We have been accused of training terrorists and other absurdities."

If the reasons behind the arrest of the aid workers will probably remain a mystery, Emergency has received unofficial apologies during the informal talks of the past few days and Tolo tv, one of Afghanistan's main television networks, publicly apologized to the charity on Sunday.

The story made big headlines not just in Italy. Emergency faced both strong opposition and unconditional support. They were accused of supporting the Taliban and acting with political interest, which a humanitarian agency should not get involved in. On the other hand, a group called "Io sto con Emergency" (I support Emergency) attracted more than 200,000 supporters in 48 hours.

"I think the way the press handled the case proved that in our country there is still great ignorance around Afghanistan and how life is over there. The people who questioned our motives in the country don't appreciate what it is like to work in a place like Afghanistan. They haven't been to the country, they have never seen a child walking into an emergency room with his brain coming out of his head after stepping on a landmine", she added.

Now Rome judiciary authorities have opened an investigation into the defamation of the three aid workers.

Medical staff at Lashkar Gah's hospital was also accused of giving medical assistance to Taliban mujahideens.

"If a person comes into our hospital with his head smashed our surgeons will not hesitate for a minute and they certainly won't care about which side that person is on. Those are the basic principles of humanitarian aid and if you don't stick to them you might as well flush the Geneva Convention down the toilet. The whole situation seems crazy to me. Some of the volunteers were very well known in Laskar Gah, everybody knew they were there to help those in need. I even told someone: do you remember who is it that we're talking about here? They are the same people you chatted to, worked with for all of these years", said Strada.

A few weeks ago Gino Strada told the press that "until recently we managed to treat the wounded in Afghanistan because international conventions were respected...today this is no longer possible", and he spoke about Emergency's workers being "troublesome witnesses of civilians' suffering in the country".

"We have one binding condition: we provide medical help for everybody. Since we first arrived in



Afghanistan we've always made this point very clear. We get in touch with the local authorities and we ask them this simple question: "we are here to help every single person, with no distinction based on gender, religion and political orientation. Is this ok with you?" Back in 1999, when Afghanistan was under the Taliban rule and you didn't have an official authority to turn to, both the Taliban and their opponents had granted us the permission to do our job. Our male doctors then treated women and girls and no one had anything to complain about regarding the way things were handled or the way we made contact with them", explained Cecilia Strada.

It appears that the Italian government is not responsible for the reopening of the hospital and Strada assured the government didn't play a major role in the release of the three aid workers.

"They were released because they were innocent and only after their innocence had been proven. The Italian ambassador righteously put pressure on the Afghan authorities in order to understand the reasons behind their detention, but there were absolutely no secret arrangements".

According to Strada, Emergency's operations in Afghanistan had never faced any particular difficulty in the past.

"There has only been one time; a group of armed Taliban burst into our centre in the Helmand province and harmed two people from our staff - including one of the men who was arrested in April - because male workers were passing food directly into women's hands and that wasn't ok", she said.

As a consequence of the Taliban raid in the medical centre, Emergency shut down its activities in the territory for four months.

"We learnt from episodes like that. Since we opened our first hospital we have been in contact with the Afghan Department of Health as well as with the Ministry of Interior. This doesn't make you less neutral or independent in what you do, but it is a mandatory condition that has granted our aid workers a chance to do their job".

"The fact that we have been in Afghanistan since 1999 and we have built a strong relation of mutual trust with both the people and the authorities has made our job easier, more than receiving generous funding or international support".

Another occasion in which the charity faced strong opposition was when it participated in brokering a deal for the release of the Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo who was kidnapped in Afghanistan southern province of Helmand in 2007.

"At that time we had been contacted by the Italian government, they asked us to spread the voice that Mastrogiacomo and his driver and interpreter were not spies. We had been in that region for a long time, we spoke the language. We simply asked the kidnappers for a humanitarian gesture. All negotiations were made publicly, no secret service was involved. It was not a role that we enjoyed playing but we did it because we felt we couldn't turn our back on them", explained the president of the charity.

Emergency was founded in Milan in 1994. Its 4,000 volunteers are currently operating in some of the most problematic regions of the world including Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Iraq and Sudan. The charity has treated 2.5 million people in its 28 hospitals all over the Afghanistan during the past eleven years.

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