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### Iraqi boy brought here for lifesaving surgery

BY SUSAN ABRAM, Staff Writer

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Kirillos Shamuel was born with a broken heart.

He came into a world that was - that still is - falling to pieces around him: the sounds of car bombs detonating at random on busy streets, the cries of men, women and children pelted by shards of glass and twisted metal, buildings that once housed stores and hospitals flattened to rubble and dust.

Had he been born here - where 30,000 children are born each year with congenital heart disease - Kirillos would have undergone surgery immediately to mend the hole in his tiny heart.



But he was born in Baghdad, Iraq, where bombing victims demand urgent care and a sick baby is simply deemed unlucky.

"I took him everywhere and asked for help, but everyone told me no, that there was no one who could do this surgery," Vivian Shamuel said.

It was best, the doctors told her and her husband, Binyameen, just to take Kirillos home to die.

But among Shamuel's people is a universal saying: When God closes one door, he opens another. In this case, the door opened in the San Fernando Valley.

A desperate plea sent through the Internet by Kirillos' father was picked up by an Encino-based charity, then a doctor who himself knew the horrors

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of war. Eventually, the 13-month-old boy landed in the hands of a world-renowned cardiologist at

Loma Linda University Children's Hospital.

On Wednesday, he received his much-needed operation and is expected to recover.

#### 'A different flavor'

The plea to save Kirillos was first seen on an Assyrian-language Web site, Ankawa.com, a silent scream for help that made its way from Iraq to Pierre Toulakanyof Encino, president of the Los Angeles chapter for the Assyrian Aid Society. The nonprofit formed 15 years ago after the Persian Gulf War.

At least a dozen such e-mails come to Toulakany each month from Assyrians in Iraq who need medications for cancer and diabetes, or for spinal-cord and eye injuries

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"The situation is very bad there, especially in Baghdad," said Angie Toulakany, who works alongside her husband. "You can go and say, 'My child is dying,' and no one is paying attention to you."

So Pierre Toulakany turned to his organization's newly appointed medical director, Dr. Samir Johna.

"In my 22 years as a doctor, I've saved the lives of gunshot victims and victims of car accidents, but this had a different flavor," said Johna, a general surgeon at Kaiser Fontana and associate clinical professor of surgery at Loma Linda University.

"I knew that the medical care system in Iraq was in shambles," he said. "I knew that physicians there were fleeing."

Once considered the best in the region, Iraq's health system has suffered from years of neglect and war, according to USAID, an independent federal government agency guided by the secretary of state.

Diseases such as measles, respiratory infections and malaria affect 30 percent of children under 5, and lack of care during pregnancy contributes to high maternal mortality rates, according to the agency.

Johna, who had studied medicine in Baghdad, knew firsthand how medical systems could fall apart quickly during political unrest. He had seen his country collapse during the Iran-Iraq conflict, in which he himself was forced to fight. His job was to disarm bombs in desert minefields.

After reviewing Kirillos' medical files, Johna made a request at Loma Linda Children's Hospital. The child's case was accepted because all he needed was one operation that would help him grow up healthy, his colleagues told him. But Kirillos needed to be brought to Loma Linda as soon as possible.

"We went through a lot of hurdles to qualify and clear this family," Toulakany said.

"We couldn't get the baby and his mother a passport and visa in Baghdad, so we contacted the U.S. Embassy in Jordan. We had to provide a guarantee that we were a humanitarian organization."

After four months of sending medical records, letters of recommendations and assurances that the baby and his mother would return to Baghdad once the operation was complete, the visas were granted, and a \$5,000 donation to the Assyrian Aid Society paid for two round-trip tickets for Kirillos and his mother.

**All the pieces had come together.**

"This was an enormous amount of responsibility," Toulakany said. "If he was brought into the wrong hands, it would have been like the worst bomb any insurgent from Iraq could have thrown in my face."

#### **Angels of God**

Little did Toulakany know that baby Kirillos would be operated on by Dr. Leonard Bailey, a top-notch heart surgeon best remembered for implanting the heart of a baboon in an infant known as Baby Fae in 1984.

"When he came in, he was dusky and blue and he had suffered from blue spells for probably some time," Bailey said.

The baby had a hole in the receiving chambers of his heart, and his lungs were not used to receiving much air.

But after a four-hour operation Wednesday, Kirillos seemed to be responding fine, Bailey said.

Worldwide, congenital heart defects affect about 5 percent of the population. A majority of the children who receive surgery to mend the defects go on to live normal lives, said Bailey, who is performing three similar operations on children at the hospital this week.

He marvels at how far Kirillos had come for the surgery.

"What are the odds?" he said. "I'm pleased I could be a little piece of a constructive force in an era of so much destruction."

Hospitals across the United States are often approached to help with surgeries for people around the world. But each case is dependent on several factors, including how curable the disease is.

"There's certainly a wide need for this type of surgery for these kinds of patients all over the world, but we don't have the ability to do this with many patients," said Jerry Daly, vice president for Global Outreach, a Mississippi-based humanitarian group.

"Only in America could these things happen," Pierre Toulakany said. "If we didn't have the facility here that could help us, if we didn't have the understanding from authorities, this boy would not have lived past 2 years old. All they had to do was turn down the visa and it would have been over."

As for Shamael, who named her child after a Coptic saint whose church she used to visit in Baghdad, she said she is still in disbelief that she is in the United States.

She calls the doctors and all those people who helped to save Kirillos "angels from God."

"From the moment they found me, they became my family," she said. "I was very scared. But God brought us to them and I am so thankful."

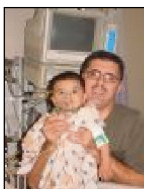
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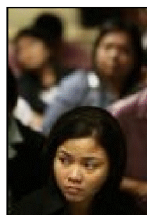
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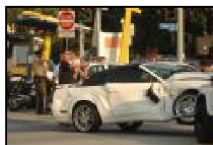
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