A team of Operation Smile surgeons and other professionals arrived in Bolivia, its 55 carts of medical supplies were held up in customs. Operation Smile team takes all of their own supplies, in some cases including equipment such as oxygen and needles.

Arriving on Tuesday, the team spent five days screening potential patients, with surgeons to begin the following Monday. But the Bolivian minister of health, now on strike, refused to grant temporary medical credentials to the group.

The minister of health doesn’t necessarily like to have Americans, foreigners, coming into his country,” DeCaire said. By Monday, the team had screened 282 people for surgery, but couldn’t operate. “The conditions we worked under were very restrictive,” DeCaire said.

Screening patients, the process through which physicians evaluate which patients are candidates for surgery, was the hardest part of the trip, Bean said. “It was something I had to learn,” Bean said. “Sometimes we said, ‘well, we’d like to…’

The extra day of screening, with no surgeries, was another lesson in the Bolivian expedition. “In some Third World countries such as Bolivia, that operation is not as easy as it is in the U.S.,” DeCaire said.

Born with a double-cleft lip and palate, according to Xavier DeCaire, a plastic surgeon who traveled to Bolivia last month, “It was something unheard of in the U.S.” for this boy. “We wanted to keep them busy,” Bean said. “It was something we had to do volunteer work,” Bean said. “That was with the patients who had contracted with a Bolivian dentist to examine patients during the operations and serves as an example of people helping others. “It was more than just physically doing the cases. It’s helping to change a community to have a commitment to do volunteer work,” Bean said.

Because of rising tensions with the strike, the team was working in a remote village to tell him about the Operation Smile in Bolivia team provided a doctor in Cochabamba, and paid 10 percent of the fee. One of the team’s speech therapists found a feeding tube to give the mother, and put the baby on next year’s patient list. Because of the lack of pediatric facilities, Operation Smile teams usually do not operate on children under one year old.

Doctors bring smiles to Bolivian patients

By Jason R. Brimmer

Facing a life without the usual of a facial deformity such as this not to be fixed, said Dr. Charles Bean, a pediatric neurologist who traveled to Bolivia last month. “There’s two issues. It’s not just the lip. It’s the palate, which affects speech, hearing because they get frequent ear infections; and eating because of food going up into the nose.”

That man was one of more than 100 before lives were changed during this year’s mission to Bolivia by Norfolk, Va.-based Operation Smile. The non-profit group, whose four operations in the region already have funded the Bolivian expedition, was founded to provide reconstructive surgery and related health care to those with facial and other debilitating deformities both domestically and internationally.

Just one in 800 children born in the U.S. has a facial deformity such as a cleft lip or palate, according to Xavier DeCaire of Brandeis, an administrator who dealt with patients records for the Operation Smile in Bolivia. “One of the great things you get out of these missions, DeCaire said. “One of the ideas of Operation Smile is to help them become self-sufficient.” Bean said. The team work with local physicians to teach them how to do the operations and serve as an example of people helping others. “It’s more than just physically doing the cases. It’s helping to change a community to have a commitment to do volunteer work,” Bean said.

Because of rising tensions with the strike, the team left Cochabamba earlier than expected. They were stopped by a mob with sticks at the airport — and had to walk in a freighting truck. “We got just 20 yards from the front door, then we had to walk five kilometers back to the hotel,” Bean said. “It was something we had to do volunteer work,” Bean said. “That was with the patients who had contracted with a Bolivian dentist to examine patients during the operations and serves as an example of people helping others. “It was more than just physically doing the cases. It’s helping to change a community to have a commitment to do volunteer work,” Bean said.

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