

A world of hurt, hope

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Six-year-old Maria Aman from Gaza sat in a wheelchair in the Israeli 1st-grade class, a respirator tube in her neck and a bright pink school bag by her side, calling out the name of an animal drawn on the blackboard by a girl.

"Cat!" Maria shouted in Hebrew, adding her voice to the chorus of responses.

Maria was left paralyzed from the neck down last year when an Israeli missile that killed a Palestinian militant in his vehicle in Gaza City sent shrapnel tearing through her family's car, which was next to the target. Maria's mother, older brother, grandmother and uncle were killed.

Taken to Israel for treatment, Maria was moved to Alyn Hospital, a rehabilitation center for children in Jerusalem, where she has learned to guide her motorized wheelchair, use a computer and draw, using head and neck muscles she can still control. She has learned Hebrew and has begun attending a bilingual Jewish-Arab school in Jerusalem.

The story of Maria, who cannot breathe on her own, and whose hold on life is maintained by the respirator attached to her wheelchair, has punched a hole in the wall of indifference and hostility that separates Israelis from Palestinians.

Reports about the case in the Israeli media led to the formation of a group of Israeli volunteers that is helping Maria and her family and supporting them in a court battle to prevent authorities from sending her to the West Bank, where she risks being cut off from the vital medical care she is getting in Israel.

Maria's father, Hamdi Aman, 30, is constantly at her side, living at the hospital with his surviving 4-year-old son, Mu'min.

After the missile strike that devastated his family on May 20, 2006, Aman was barred for nearly three weeks from entering Israel to see his gravely wounded daughter, apparently on grounds that he might carry out an act of revenge.

Aman was later allowed in and accompanied his daughter when she was moved to Alyn Hospital, a cutting-edge facility whose respiratory rehabilitation unit for children is unique in the Middle East.

The Israeli Defense Ministry agreed to cover the costs of Maria's hospitalization, but her father was confined to the hospital for months and initially received no financial support, depending on contributions of food and money, sometimes left discreetly on Maria's bed by visitors.

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Defense Ministry agreed to pay for his
1 a monthly living stipend and permitted him to

travel outside the facility.

The initial restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities have been offset by expressions of sympathy and help from ordinary Israelis who heard about Maria's story in media reports.

Volunteers come forward

Several volunteers visit the hospital regularly, helping Aman with shopping for food and clothes, spending time with Maria and pursuing contacts with Israeli officials to look after her needs. Two human-rights lawyers have volunteered to represent the family in a Supreme Court petition against the plans to transfer Maria to the West Bank.

"These people are like family," Aman said, sitting outside the room he shares with his children, which is filled with stuffed animals, games and other gifts brought by Israeli well-wishers. "I can't leave these people. They have come with their hearts, as if what happened to me happened to them, and they're willing to stand up to their own country for me. It has been so moving."

One of the volunteers is Dalia Beker, 52, who read about Maria's story in a newspaper article and since then has been visiting Maria and her father almost daily at the hospital, helping her father with grocery shopping, laundry and countless other errands.

Through e-mail messages, Beker helped organize a network of support for Maria and her family and, along with other volunteers, she has set up a bank account for financial contributions.

"I saw a picture of Maria and her father in the paper, and it captivated me," Beker said. "We want to give emotional support, to be with them, so they will know that we are their family in Israel. It's very important that they not be here alone."

The volunteers have taken Maria to the zoo, to the Jerusalem mall, and even to Tel Aviv, where she gazed at the sea for the first time in more than a year.

Now efforts are focused on legal action after the Defense Ministry informed Aman last month that because Maria had completed her course of treatment at Alyn, she would be moved to a rehabilitation center in the West Bank city of Ramallah, where the staff would be trained and equipped to care for her.

The letter follows previous efforts by authorities to move the Amans to the Palestinian areas, apparently to avoid a precedent in which other wounded Palestinian civilians and their families would demand to stay indefinitely in Israel for treatment and rehabilitation.

Aman rejects the move to the West Bank on the grounds that the staff at the rehabilitation facility in Ramallah has no experience in treating quadriplegic children on a respirator like Maria. "I don't want inexperienced doctors practicing on my daughter," he said.

el of urgent hospital care available in Jerusalem keeping Maria alive. Travel restrictions and

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volatile conditions in the West Bank could further jeopardize the girl's life in an emergency, the petition says.

Seeking permanent residence

Adi Lustigman, one of the lawyers representing the Amans, said that Maria, her father and her brother should be granted permanent residence in Israel that would enable her to continue receiving the best care, funded by the Israeli government. "The state has to take responsibility for innocent people harmed by a targeted killing," Lustigman said.

A Defense Ministry spokeswoman, who declined to be identified, said assistance is being given to Maria "beyond that required by law," because Israel is not liable for civilian casualties caused by what the spokeswoman called "an act of war."

In response to the petition, state attorneys requested a delay of court hearings until the end of the year to allow for a review of Maria's case. In the meantime, the state said, assistance to Maria and her father will continue and she will not be moved to the West Bank. The court granted a 90-day delay.

Dr. Eliezer Be'eri, director of the respiratory rehabilitation unit at Alyn Hospital, said that the hospital's aim is to get patients on respirators back in a home environment, and that it is "feasible" that conditions could be created in Ramallah to enable Maria to go there. However those conditions do not exist today and would require "a lot of work" to create, Be'eri said.

So Maria and her family remain in limbo, pending further developments in court.

"As long as we don't have a viable plan outside the hospital," Be'eri said, "I can't discharge her."

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