

Crisis at the Hospital
By Calvin Chen You Jia

I looked at my next patient, sitting on the bed. Dread flooded through me.

I am a doctor, in a once prosperous nation. A top oil exporter, we enjoyed plenty. Then we elected the wrong leaders. Corruption, mismanagement, then an oil price crash collapsed our economy. A government-led looting spree, through fraudulent government contracts, phantom payrolls across agencies and bogus public projects, evaporated our reserves.

Now my country, a shell of its former self, devoid of basic institutions, barely functions. Shortages of necessities plague us; diseases like tuberculosis and malaria returned – diseases I learnt in medical school to be eradicated; and our capital owns the world's highest murder rate.

Our government, or the criminals pretending to govern, keep power by controlling the military, limiting public utilities and withholding vital necessities. The people are indubitably furious. Violent, anti-government protests raged on for months. At my Emergency Department, the only cases I treat are injured protesters. Or at least try to treat. The hospital, with little medicine, is helpless in treating rubber bullet wounds and tear gas infections.

My patient today wasn't a protester. She was a girl, under five. Her anxious parents tried desperately to get the attention of doctors running by. Looking at her, I entertained the thought of how difficult it is to live as a child in these dark times. I counted myself lucky to have not brought one into this world. I think of my sister, who, with her husband, children and our parents, escaped the country last year by bribing drivers and policemen to cross the border. She calls me weekly, asking me to join them, but thinking of the people in agony, begging for relief, and what I represented to them, I just couldn't.

Rachel's parents told me of their situation. A fall, a scraped knee, then became a fever, then a leg swelling. They tried University Hospital, the nation's best, only to escape a shootout between government forces and protesters. I reassured them, then looked Rachel in the eye. With my throat tight, I said, "It's going to be alright." I had no idea.

Weeks flew by. Rachel was diagnosed with a staph infection. Bacteria had eaten through knee tissue and was attacking her joints. An IV drip with the hospital's last antibiotics was set up. Rachel's parents, a mechanic and a cook, saved up some money for her treatment. Beyond it, they saw nothing but darkness.

Things deteriorated. One night, we noticed strange breathing sounds Rachel made, like she was drowning. I feared the worst, that bacteria had spread to her lungs and caused a hole. With the hospital's X-ray machine broken, the only way to know was by transporting her to a private clinic for imaging, a risky and expensive move. With my fears confirmed, we had to operate. First we needed a chest drainage device and antibiotics, supplies that were used up or pillaged. Without them, Rachel won't survive.

When I broke this to her parents, it was the most heartbreaking scene I had to endure. For a moment, I thought of quitting medicine and running away. I thought of the men that put Rachel into this situation, vile men tucked away in luxury of their villas, while children like Rachel lay dying in unsanitised beds. It was a hatred and anger I could not confront because I could do nothing about it.

Rachel's parents never gave up. They assembled a team, getting relatives and friends to search the streets for medical supplies. Rachel's father joined thousands of others racing against time to save loved ones. He stood in hours-long lines outside pharmacies, gathering supplies. The family borrowed money to purchase black market antibiotics priced a hundred times their retail value. I called other hospitals, hoping for a donated machine, but was accused of trying to resell medical equipment. Thankfully, a private clinic came through.

A month of hospitalisation passed. Rachel was recovering. Her fever broke. We declared her infection-free. But while the bacteria receded, Rachel's heart was scarred. As she grew, her heart valve might leak, causing heart failure. Eventually her valve must be replaced. The bacteria also damaged the growth plate in her knee. She might walk with a limp, and one leg might grow to be shorter.

Her exhausted parents were simply thankful that Rachel was alive and still could grow up healthy. By now, Rachel's story spread throughout the country and became a symbol of the resistance, a sign of how deadly our corruption-ridden country has become for the sick and vulnerable. Foreign media picked up on the story, and while international aid poured in, hospitals have not yet seen an uptick in medical supplies - unsurprisingly. As Rachel's family left, hospital staff bade them farewell. I hugged Rachel and wished her not goodbye, but good luck.

(800 words)