

As the conflict between Gaddafi loyalist forces and rebels intensifies in Libya, a team of South African journalists, including The Times photographer **Halden Krog**, joined a mission to bring much-needed medical assistance to the war-ravaged country

Mission of mercy from SA

HALDEN KROG



IN LIBYA |

A TEAM from South African-based humanitarian organisation Gift of the Givers was holed up in a hospital 25km outside Ajdabiyah, Libya, yesterday as government forces rapidly advanced.

The team, accompanied by a group of South African journalists, travelled through the town, which was overrun by forces loyal to Colonel Muammar Gaddafi on Saturday.

A nervous energy could be felt throughout the hospital, with cars packed and ready to race off.

Soon after entering Libya at the weekend, the team's three vans were shot at as they sped across the eastern desert.

On Saturday, Ajdabiya was about 170km from the front line. Yesterday it was overrun.

Arriving at the Amal Africa Hotel, on the outskirts of town, the South African media team and the Gift of the Givers people were given the last open beds in the establishment.

The gym was converted into a dormitory for the media team.

The doctors were allocated bunks at the local hospital.

They spent the night at the hospital, meeting the medical staff and planning where they could be deployed most effectively.

Dr Salim Langhi is one of 25 Libyan doctors who work in teams of three per ambulance, racing to the front lines to collect wounded combatants.

"They have excellent expertise and their help is very much appreciated," said Langhi of the Gift of the Givers volunteers. "They are not scared and they want to go to the front."

"We collect patients from both sides. It doesn't make a difference. They are all Libyan."



FUGITIVES: Bangladeshi refugees freshen up after sleeping rough at the Egyptian-Libyan border. About 1 000 refugees are waiting at the border, trying to go home or to return to their jobs in Libya
Picture: HALDEN KROG

According to Langhi, he and his colleagues are short of equipment and other resources.

"Medical students serve as drivers and there are no nurses here so we do all the work."

As the forces of Gaddafi push east, we hear that the town of Ras Lanuf has been captured by government troops.

With the fighting intensifying,

wounded fighters have to be picked up from the constantly shifting front line.

"A day like yesterday [Saturday] was horrible," said Langhi.

"We had 12 seriously wounded. The day before we had 10 dead when a bomb dropped no more than 50m from us."

When asked if he was afraid, he replied: "We always get frightened.

It's fate if you are meant to die. It's all risky."

Though he and his fellow doctors face this grim reality every day, he is surprisingly upbeat about the future of his country.

"As far as I can see, they don't really want to kill each other. It's all political. People are not hungry here. There is plenty of food.

"They simply want a better life."

As the medical team waits to go to the front line, we hear that forces loyal to Gaddafi have pushed the rebels back as far as the town of Brega, about 60km from where the Gift of the Givers have set up base.

From our hotel room, we watch as cars filled with the belongings of the people of the town race away to the east — away from the approaching fighting. ● See Page 10