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Vt.-made medical unit heads to Iraq

By Carla Occaso

ST. JOHNSBURY -- Gov. Jim Douglas cut yet another ribbon Monday to honor a Vermont business, but this time it had international economic and diplomatic significance.

Douglas joined Dr. Giuseppe Gola of the Italian Foreign Ministry and Dr. A. Hadi Khalili, cultural attache to the Embassy of Iraq in St. Johnsbury to celebrate Italy's \$2.2 million gift of a Vermont-made mobile surgical unit to a children's hospital in Iraq. The unit was manufactured in St. Johnsbury and provides a safe, well-lighted, sterile environment in natural emergencies and wartime situations, according to engineers with Mobile Medical International Corp., the manufacturer.

Mobile Medical played host to an open house in honor of the gift from the Italian government to a children's hospital in Nassiriya, Iraq. The gift is an act of cooperation between Italy and Iraq, but it is also a memorial to the lives of Italian soldiers who died in Iraq, Gola said.

"Four years ago in Nassiriya, 19 Italian soldiers were killed in a bomb attack. It is a memorial," Gola said. He said he hopes the unit will be running in Iraq by November -- the fourth anniversary of the soldiers' deaths.

The unit provides a surgical facility that meets or exceeds standards of any U.S. hospital, Mobile Medical founder Rick Cochran said. It can be shipped anywhere to be set up and ready for patients within a half-hour, said Kyle Affeldt, senior vice president of operations.

Mobile medical units have the same lights and air filtration system as traditional surgical facilities, Affeldt said. Air ducts suck out contaminated air, and filtered air is circulated back inside, to prevent spread of infectious disease. It runs on a generator, but can tie into a power source. Tents made of anti-bacterial fabric can easily attach to expand the facility as needed, said Howard Dudley, an employee of four years.

"It is pretty phenomenal," Dudley said. "There should be one in every state. It is incredible for emergency situations."

Mobile Medical has been a boon to the Northeast Kingdom's economy, said Steve Patterson, executive director of the Northeastern Vermont Development Association. The company has 40 employees and expects to have 50 by winter.

Cochran, of Walden, said he started the company in 1994 with the idea of building mobile surgical units with top-notch equipment. He has since sold units to U.S. hospitals, corrections facilities and foreign countries, including the United Arab Emirates.

Douglas praised Cochran for what he has done for the economy of Vermont.

"You've been able to succeed in a challenging environment," Douglas said to Cochran. "You had a vision. You took a risk, made an investment and persevered."

Teen raises money to fill unit

The Italian government is giving a \$2.2 million mobile surgical unit to Iraq, but some of the supplies will come through the help of a St. Johnsbury Academy senior.

Lindsey Cochran, daughter of Mobile Medical International Corp. founder Rich Cochran, is raising money to fill the new mobile unit with medical supplies so it arrives in Iraq fully equipped.

The teenager said she has learned that about 200,000 children have died in Iraq from ailments or injuries directly related to the war. "I believe we have an obligation to help these children," she said.

Anyone interested in donating money to buy emergency supplies for Iraqi children can find information at www.stjohnsburyacademy.org.