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Mission of Mercy keep ship in service

Floating hospital gets pulled off Navy hit list

By Steve Liewer - UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER November 26, 2006

The Mercy's hugely popular humanitarian missions to Asia in the past two years may have saved the San Diego-based hospital ship and its East Coast sister vessel, the Comfort, from a trip to the scrap yard.

The converted oil tankers, both 30 years old, were on the Navy's hit list. Last week, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Mullen said he planned to keep sending the ships on humanitarian journeys once a year. Mullen cited favorable public reaction from surveys by Terror Free Tomorrow in countries the Mercy visited during its two most recent journeys.

The Mercy and Comfort "are uniquely suited to disaster-relief and humanitarian missions," said Cmdr. John Kirby, Mullen's spokesman. "The Navy is very committed to carrying on this type of mission."

The 2003 invasion of Iraq hurt America's image around the world, especially in predominantly Muslim countries. Several surveys showed the United States got a public relations boost from military-led humanitarian missions, including a Mercy trip after the Dec. 26, 2004, tsunami in South Asia.

The Pentagon tried to recapture that magic in April, sending the Mercy on a five-month deployment to the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh and East Timor. Teams from Project HOPE, the Aloha Medical Mission and other charities collaborated with the Navy's medical experts.

They treated nearly 61,000 patients, including more than 1,000 who underwent surgery. They also administered at least 10,500 vaccinations, pulled about 6,000 teeth and gave away thousands of pairs of eyeglasses. Some members of the crew worked with local residents to pave roads and repair hospitals, schools and orphanages. Until the Mercy's post-tsunami tour and a voyage by the Comfort to the battered Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina, the hospital ships had focused on wartime missions.

After the Mercy's latest trip, a bipartisan group in Washington, D.C., surveyed residents in Indonesia and Bangladesh. The polls by Terror Free Tomorrow showed that 85 percent of Indonesians and 95 percent of Bangladeshis approved of the Mercy crew's work. Most respondents also said U.S. post-disaster aid made them view the United States more favorably.

Mullen said the Mercy's 2006 mission cost the Navy \$17.5 million – an investment he deemed worthwhile.

"I am sure that, as a country, we more than broke even," he said.