

Psychiatrist lent expertise in Armenia

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Six months after news of the devastating earthquake in Soviet Armenia rocked the world, most people in America have tucked away the tragedy as an event of the past.

But not Dr. Edmund Gergerian. Just returned from a mission of mercy to the city of Kirovakan in Armenia, Soviet Union, he knows the suffering that the earthquake survivors still are facing.

A psychiatrist for the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office in Willowbrook, Dr. Gergerian is of Armenian descent. He has been looking for ways to help since news of the Dec. 7, 1988 earthquake which killed an estimated 50,000 people and destroyed cities.

"I'm a troubleshooter," said Dr. Gergerian, a Queens resident. "I like challenges."

He took a leave of absence from work and flew to Armenia March 13 for two weeks as part of a six-person mental health team sponsored by the Earthquake Relief Fund to Armenia. The group has been sending small teams in two-week shifts, and has found a great need for services.

"People in an earthquake are devastated, traumatized. The best way to deal with that is to stay there and deal with the fears," Gergerian said. "Exactly the reverse happened: mass evacuation. Working through their fears and other symptoms has become very difficult."

The population of Kirovakan, 170,00 before the earthquake, fell

to 70,000 as many fled the destruction in the city. It has climbed back to about 100,000 as some have returned.

The 3.5 million people of Armenia, a Soviet state the size of Belgium, have some very real causes for fear, Gergerian noted. Eighty percent of the buildings in Kirovakan are unsafe, with half-inch cracks a common sight.

Almost everything has moved to tents: housing, hospitals, offices. He saw patients with three local psychiatrists in a huge tent equipped with heat and electricity, as many of them are. Rebuilding the city will take years.

Irrational fears and lingering trauma are widespread, however, and depression is a major problem, as those who have lost several family members are not uncommon. About 80 percent of the people will develop post-traumatic stress syndrome, Gergerian estimates.

Survivors may deal with guilt for having survived. Schoolchildren are afraid to go out of the house alone or sleep alone. Sudden noises can cause panic, and the feeling of an impending earthquake is very real months after the event.

The day before he arrived in Kirovakan, he was told, a brush fire in the surrounding mountains caused mass hysteria.

"The people were up in the streets, in panic, running right and left. They didn't know what to do. They thought it was a volcano," he said, although there are no volcanoes in the area. "You see where the irrational part comes in."