

**ARTICLE ABOUT WORK IN GAMBIA:
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Perfecting vision beyond borders

Indian Rotarians provide eye care for children and adults in the Gambia.

Dec 2017 **Kiran Zehra**

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From R: Dr K V Ravishankar, Dr M V Ravikumar, Dr Arnab Biswas, Abhijit Ramprasad and Dr Vasantha Kumar with Anaesthesia Assistant Mbisin and Ophthalmologist Dr Oke of Sheik Zayed hospital in Banjul, the Gambia.

When the Gambian Health Ministry requested ophthalmologists Dr M V Ravikumar and Dr K V Ravishankar of RI District 3190 to plan an eye camp in the Gambia, they grabbed the opportunity.

This was because in a country with two million people, one percent suffer from eye-related problems, but there are only three ophthalmologists. So there is a huge backlog of patients — mainly children — waiting for surgical intervention, says Dr Ravikumar, who spearheads the Avoidable Blindness project in the District since 2002.

Dr Ravishankar had visited the Gambia twice earlier on invitation from the Government to perform paediatric eye surgery. He has also volunteered in ten VTT programmes and was onboard the Mercy Ships to Africa in 2013 as part of the then D 3140's VTT to Guinea. Both the ophthalmologists have been working together since 2001. "That was when Frank J Devlyn was RI President (2000–2001) and TRF would directly fund the project," recalls Dr Ravikumar. His club raised \$1,000 which was matched by TRF. "We performed 100 cataract surgeries then and that's when I first met - Ravishankar," he adds.

Gambia,” he adds.

Ophthalmologists M V Ravikumar (standing third from left) and K V Ravishankar (seated) with the Gambian children.

The project cost \$14,000 including travel, equipment and other medical supplies. Rotary Clubs of Esposende from Portugal, Guildford from the UK and Statsville from the US, three clubs from D 3190 — E Club of Bangalore, Bangalore East and Koramangala, and the Combat Blindness International of USA, a foundation affiliated to the International Association for Prevention of Blindness, pitched in with their support for the project.

The local Rotarians organised media coverage of the camp which was aired on the Gambian radio and television channels. “Children were our focus and 35 of them were operated for rheumatic cataract, cornea issues and squint eyes,” says Dr Ravikumar. He interacted with the host club members, including DGE Aki Allen of RC Banjul and explained how, by doing service projects, they can increase Rotary’s public image and membership. DGE Allen will be the first governor from the Gambia.

When the camp drew to a close, “there were 100 children awaiting their turn. But we could complete only 42 surgeries. Although we have left behind material and equipment for 200 more surgeries, the sight of the waiting children still flashes in my mind,” says Dr Ravishankar