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Unprecedented collaboration between the two leading cleft charities will eliminate backlog of 4,000-plus Rwandans with untreated clefts and establish ongoing in-country medical training programs

NEW YORK and NORFOLK, Va., April 17, 2013 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- Smile Train and Operation Smile, the two leading cleft care charities in the world, announced the launch of Rwanda Smiles -- a groundbreaking initiative to create a "cleft-free" Rwanda. This joint effort is in collaboration with the Government of the Republic of Rwanda to create the first-ever cleft-free country in Africa.

President H.E. General Paul Kagame of Rwanda has expressed support for Rwanda Smiles, to ensure every Rwandan born with a cleft lip or cleft palate receives life-changing surgery and lives a healthy and productive life. The Rwandan Minister of Health, Dr. Agnes Binagwaho, has committed her support as well.

"The Ministry of Health of Rwanda is pleased to partner with Operation Smile and Smile Train to launch the Rwanda Smiles Alliance to create a cleft-free Rwanda," Dr. Binagwaho said. "This goal is a shared vision of promise -- a promise of fully healthy lives for all Rwandan children and adults, including their physical, mental, social, and emotional wellbeing. The procedures to repair cleft lip and cleft palate will reach all communities and build medical and surgical capacity among Rwandan clinicians and health managers. The Rwanda Smiles Alliance will help provide equitable access to safe, high-quality cleft care for all those in need."

Each year, 250-300 babies are born with clefts in Rwanda. Approximately 4,000 children and adults in Rwanda today are suffering from a cleft. Those affected can't eat or speak properly, and are shunned and ostracized from their communities. Rwanda Smiles will treat all Rwandans living with unrepaired clefts.

Operation Smile and Smile Train are working shoulder-to-shoulder to scale up their efforts in Rwanda. By working closely with the Rwandan Ministry of Health, Rwanda Smiles will focus on the following needs:

- Identifying all those in need of cleft treatment.
- Providing free treatment and care to all Rwandans currently living in the country with unrepaired clefts.
- Training local medical professionals so they can provide ongoing care for children with clefts in their communities.

"I am so proud that Smile Train will be working with Operation Smile, and the government and people of Rwanda to launch this program," said Charles B. Wang, Chairman and Co-Founder of Smile Train. "This is truly a great program, and I believe that if we can be successful in eradicating clefts in Rwanda, this can be a model used throughout the world."

"This is an extraordinary opportunity for Operation Smile and Smile Train to share our combined expertise to help the people of Rwanda," said William R. Fox, Chairman of Operation Smile's Board of Directors.

"Working hand-in-hand with the Rwandan government, our shared goal is to build a sustainable program that

will have the greatest impact on changing and saving the lives of children with clefts."

To create a cleft-free Rwanda, the medical infrastructure of the country needs to expand so children born with clefts in the future will have access to ongoing cleft care. Through Rwanda Smiles, Smile Train and Operation Smile will help build this infrastructure by establishing medical training programs for Rwandan medical professionals to develop their skill levels in the areas of surgery, anesthesia, and nursing. Both organizations will engage their networks of international medical professionals to provide this specialized training for Rwandan medical teams.

The Rwandan Ministry of Health appointed three of Rwanda's hospitals (Ruhengeri, Rwamagana, and Gihundwe) to be used as treatment facilities for cleft care. These hospitals are a key component of Rwanda Smiles, in addition to the partner hospitals where both organizations already offer care, including the Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Kigali, the Rwanda Military Hospital, and the Inshuti Mu Buzima (Partners in Health) Butaro Hospital.

For more information on Rwanda Smiles, please visit www.smiletrain.org and www.operationsmile.org.

About Operation Smile (www.operationsmile.org)

Operation Smile, headquartered in Norfolk, Virginia, is an international children's medical charity that works in more than 60 countries, whose network of more than 5,000 medical volunteers from over 80 countries is dedicated to improving the health and lives of children. Since it was founded in 1982, Operation Smile has provided more than 3.5 million healthcare evaluations and has been a major catalyst to introducing cleft care surgery and training programs in countries around the world in addition to directly conducting over 200,000 free surgeries for children and young adults born with cleft lips, cleft palates and other facial deformities, as well as patients suffering from burns. To build long-term self-sufficiency in developing countries, Operation Smile establishes a local presence in country, trains local doctors and medical professionals so they are empowered to treat their own local communities, donates medical equipment and supplies, and provides year-round medical treatment through over 20 Operation Smile worldwide Comprehensive Care, Training & Treatment Centers.

About Smile Train (www.smiletrain.org)

Smile Train's mission is to provide a child born with a cleft the same opportunities in life as a child born without a cleft. We have provided more than 850,000 free cleft surgeries since 1999, comprehensive care to hundreds of thousands of poor children in developing countries and trained doctors and medical professionals in over 80 countries. Unlike many charities that do many different things, Smile Train's mission is focused on solving a single problem: cleft lip and palate. Clefts are a major problem in developing countries where more than a million children are suffering with unrepaired clefts. Most cannot eat or speak properly. Aren't allowed to attend school or hold a job. And face very difficult lives filled with shame and isolation, pain and heartache. Their clefts usually go untreated because they are poor - too poor to pay for a simple surgery that has been around for decades. We want our mission to be yours.