

PERSPECTIVES ON THE ICRC



Ms Farzana Sadat

30, beneficiary of the ICRC orthopaedic programme in Afghanistan

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My family is from Logar Province in eastern Afghanistan. When I was a child, we fled from our home during the war to live in Kabul with relatives because it was not safe where we lived. As a child, I enjoyed playing outside with our neighbour's children. I lost my leg in a landmine accident when I was 14 years old. I was going to my neighbour's house when I stepped on a landmine that exploded and threw me into the air, raising lots of dust. I can remember the muffled voices of people shouting as I lay disoriented and bleeding on the ground.

My father and other people heard the explosion and came to my aid. I recall the horrid look on his face when he picked me up. My father and others rushed me to the hospital on a wheelbarrow. Although I cannot remember everything that happened on the way to the hospital, the crying of my mother and others who were there remains in my memory. When we arrived at the hospital's emergency room, the medical staff hurried to attend to me before I lost consciousness. I learned later that the ICRC was supporting the hospital to care for those who were wounded in the fighting in Kabul during the war.

I woke up with a cloudy head the next day – feeling very drowsy. Then the doctors informed me that my right leg had been severely injured in the mine accident and could not be saved. An amputation had been necessary. I felt a storm of emotions and I started crying. My parents, who were with the doctor, came to my side to comfort me. I stayed in the hospital for forty days to recover, and then I was discharged.

When I returned home, I discovered that my life would be difficult. I could not walk on my own so I could not go to school. My family helped me everyday to try to cope with the difficult situation. After two months at home I was taken to the ICRC's orthopaedic centre in Wazir Akbar Khan where a casting for a prosthetic leg was done. Two weeks later, I returned to the orthopaedic centre, was fitted with a

custom-built prosthetic leg, and began physiotherapy. The physiotherapy sessions helped me learn to walk again in a few weeks.

My family was, however, struggling financially, although the ICRC's medical assistance was without charge. Therefore I asked for a job at the orthopaedic centre in order to support them. As luck would have it, an additional person was needed in the laundry, and I had the opportunity to start working there.

I worked in the laundry at the ICRC's orthopaedic centre for seven months; then realized that I could be of more assistance. Therefore I approached the management to enquire as to how I could contribute to the care of patients and their physical rehabilitation. I was advised to return to school because basic education was essential as a foundation for training in orthopaedics. With the financial assistance of the ICRC I went back to school and studied until I graduated from ninth grade. I then started working at the orthopaedic centre as a trainee. While I was working as a trainee I continued with night school for two hours each day. When I completed my twelfth grade at school, the ICRC sponsored me to attend a four-year training course as an orthopaedic technician, following which I took a one-year upgrading course.

While I was training at the orthopaedic centre, I worked as a technician to improve my knowledge and skills, and gained experience in working with patients. The fulfilment that I get when I am able to assist a patient is always very rewarding. As a physically challenged person myself, I understand how patients feel and the challenges they face, which means that I can help them. I feel their pain and always do my best to help them cope with their difficulties.

The ICRC has given me the unique opportunity to help those who have suffered disabilities just like me. I wish to continue helping others and making an honest living from my work. I am single and the only breadwinner in my family of eleven. My parents are ill and therefore need my assistance for their treatment and daily requirements. All my siblings, except one sister who is married, depend on my earnings for their basic needs.

Since I started working for the ICRC fifteen years ago, I have witnessed the increase in orthopaedic assistance for disabled people. Some years ago the centre was moved from Wazir Akbar Khan to a larger facility opposite Kabul University in order to cater for the increasing number of people affected by the war. Some of my observations include:

1. The increase in the number of orthopaedic technicians and the improved quality of training has enabled the centre to cope with the increasing needs, but more technicians are needed as the demand for orthopaedic devices continues to increase.
2. The adaptation of better technologies, such as polypropylene, for fabricating orthopaedic devices that are light benefits the patients with easier-to-use devices, while it is simpler to work with as well.
3. With the increased demand for physical rehabilitation services, the orthopaedic centre has seen an equal expansion in staff and equipment. It is thus better equipped to attend to the needs of the patients.
4. The new social integration programme provides skills training and micro-finance that enable some patients to return to their communities with a means to start a small business and earn a livelihood to support their families.