



ICRC Orthopaedic Programme

The ICRC has been permanently present in Afghanistan since 1987. The orthopaedic programme was one of its first activities when the Centre in Kabul opened a year later. Today, 23 years on, there are seven ICRC Ortho Centres, in Gulbahar, Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif, Faizabad and Lashkar Gah in addition to Kabul. The ICRC also supports four, non-ICRC prosthesis workshops, in Maimana, Taloqan, Ghazni and Kandahar, providing them with raw materials, staff training and technical assistance.

Being well aware that the physical rehabilitation of a disabled person is only a first step towards their social reintegration, the ICRC Orthopaedic Programme continues to champion the rights of the disabled for an active role in society through education, employment, micro credit loans and vocational training.

The ICRC Orthopaedic Programme in Afghanistan

Over the years, the ICRC Orthopaedic Programme in Afghanistan has changed considerably. Initiated in Kabul in 1988 to provide artificial legs specifically to people who had lost their own in the war, its doors were opened in 1994 to anyone with a mobility handicap. Alberto Cairo, who started his work at the Orthopaedic Centre in 1990, and has been in charge of the programme since 1992, recounts the evolution of the programme.

In 1994, after six years of assistance to victims of war, although it was the ICRC's primary role, it became obvious that it was unfair to help only those wounded in fighting, or by landmines, whilst ignoring those crippled by polio, congenital problems, tuberculosis or leprosy, victims of road accidents and accidents at work, even simply those with backache. This allowed the ICRC to open its orthopaedic activities to any person with a mobility handicap.

So far, some 104,000 patients have been registered in the seven ICRC's centres, with an average yearly increase of 6,000. Over 15,000 artificial legs and arms are manufactured every year.

Despite all these efforts, we soon realised that we were still not doing enough. The disabled need more than a plastic leg and the ability to walk again. They need a role in the society to which they return, they need to recover their dignity and their self-respect. In Afghanistan, where life is difficult enough for everybody, the disabled need even more help than others.

But what, precisely? The same as anywhere else in the world: The disabled need education, a chance to learn a skill so they can get a job, or a small loan to start a modest business.

That is why, in 1997, the orthopaedic centres started to expand again, to make room for desks and blackboards, for an employment agency, and for a bank to arrange micro-loans.

In order to set an example -- to prove that a disabled person can work as well as someone who is able bodied -- the orthopaedic programme has adopted a policy of "positive discrimination", by

employing and training only disabled people. At present, practically all the 680 employees, male and female, are former patients.

The fact that the staff at the orthopaedic centres are themselves disabled, can have a hugely positive effect on the patients, especially new arrivals. Frequently depressed when they first come for treatment -- not least because of their predicament and what they imagine will be their future -- being amongst disabled people who have rebuilt their lives and regained their dignity, gives them a huge psychological boost. At the same time, having experienced disability themselves, the staff of the centres are better equipped than anyone to understand what patients are going through, and to help them overcome their fears and concerns.

In 1990, when Karima was about 11 years old, she and her brother were returning home from their grandmother's house one evening, when a group of men standing in the street opened fire on them. Karima was badly wounded in the leg, and her brother in the jaw.

It was during Najibullah's time, and Afghanistan was fast descending into civil war. Karima was rushed to hospital where the doctors tried, but failed, to save her leg which had to be amputated.



It is never too soon to begin treatment for a child who is born with a club foot. Karima works with a young patient at the ICRC Orthopaedic Centre in Kabul.

Some time later, Karima came to the ICRC Ortho Centre in Kabul for a prosthesis. Little did she know at the time that she would receive far more than a plastic leg. In 1996, it so happened that the Centre needed a female physiotherapist, and Karima, then still a patient, was offered the job. After getting her father's permission, and undergoing training, she began work.

Today, Karima is a fully qualified physiotherapist, living a busy life helping others to walk again. "In the Centre I never think about my disability," she says. "And when I see people looking so sad when they first come in, I tell them that they will be able to walk again, and will keep their dignity."

"A lot depends on the relatives who accompany the patients. We explain everything to them, so that they can help the patient when they go home." Karima explains.

Women play an important role in the work of the ICRC orthopaedic centres. Karima meets paraplegics, land mine victims and patients with spinal chord injuries daily at the centre in Kabul. Being an amputee herself, she understands their predicament perfectly. For the women especially, she and the other female staff are an inspiration. "My wish," she says, "is to help patients feel, as I do, that their lives have a purpose."

Among the disabled population is a particularly vulnerable category, the paraplegics -- those who are paralyzed due to a spinal cord injury. For them the ICRC has created a special programme, unique in Afghanistan, called the Home Care programme (HCP). The programme assists paraplegics living in and around the towns of Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, Jalalabad, Faizabad and Gulbahar. Instead of being collected, often in ghetto-like facilities, they are assisted at home.

We make every paraplegic aware that he, himself, is his own doctor, and that his life, which is certainly difficult, is not over; that he, or she, still has an important role to play at home and in the community. The family get supports to cope with the situation, and with the numerous problems that paraplegia brings into that household. The HCP is a multi-approach programme initiated in 1996 that provides medical, economic, social and psychological rehabilitation. Home Care teams visit the paraplegic regularly, makes his/her family closely involved in the rehabilitation process, and ensures coordination among all those involved.

ICRC Orthopaedic Centres

Ali Abad Orthopaedic Centre in **Kabul** opened in 1988 and attracts patients from Kabul, Parwan, Paghman, Logar, Bamiyan, Paktia, Wardak, and Ghazni provinces. There are 313 employees, almost all of them former patients. In addition to making around 1,800 prosthesis and 5,000 orthoses per year, the Centre produces around 1,200 wheelchairs a year, 6,000 pairs of crutches and other walking aids.



Kabul, ICRC orthopaedic centre. Young patient with poliomyelitis is provided with an orthesis and physiotherapy.

As well as receiving occupational and physiotherapy, patients are offered vocational training and can get micro loans to help them start small business ventures that will enable them to earn an income and support their families. Some 5,500 patients are enrolled in the scheme. Approximately 63,000 physiotherapy sessions take place at the Ortho Centre annually. More than 2,500 bedridden people with spinal chord injuries are visited regularly at home and over 200 disabled children receive schooling.

The number of youngsters with cerebral palsy is increasing with 1,083 patients registered between January and July 2011. The Centre also has a school for training orthopaedic technicians.

The Ortho Centre in **Mazar-i-Sharif**, opened in 1991. Its catchment area includes the provinces of Balkh, Jawzjan, Samangan, Kunduz and Baghlan. There are 105 staff, all of them former patients. The work is similar to that of the Kabul Ortho Centre, with an average of 900 prosthesis and 2,300 orthoses being made for patients each year. Approximately 500 paraplegics receive home visits. There is vocational training and micro credit schemes. Around 800 patients currently have loans. There are training courses for physiotherapists and orthopaedic technicians.

The **Herat** Centre opened in 1993, and the one in **Jalalabd** two years later. Between them they employ 175 staff. Like Kabul and Mazar, they offer amputees and others with disabilities treatment, rehabilitation, and a range of vocational activities. Mobility aids such as wheelchairs and crutches are produced in both Centres. Some 200 children are receiving home schooling.

The Centre in **Gulbahar** opened in 1999 and the one in **Faizabad** in 2001. Between them they cover Parwan, Panjshir, Kapisa, Badakhshan and Takhar. These are smaller centres than the others, with a total of 69 staff between them. Although the number of amputees in both centres are fewer than in the others, there are still a total of 24,500 physiotherapy sessions conducted per year in the two centres. There is vocational training, and micro loans. Both centres provide home care services for 60-70 paraplegics, and 10 children are receiving home schooling in Gulbahar.

The Orthopaedic Centre in **Lashkar Gah** opened in 2010, covering the four southern provinces of Afghanistan. It provides amputees with prostheses, and refers patients who need orthoses to the other ICRC centres, where these are provided. There are 25 staff, all of them disabled. Since it opened Lashkar Gah has provided 500 patients with an artificial limb.

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Herat Orthopaedic Centre

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