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Landmines: A Survivor's Tale

I am a bilateral lower leg amputee as a result of a 1993 landmine accident in Somalia. Many readers of the Journal of Mine Action know the horrible landmine casualty statistics and facts. I hope that you will also contribute to making the world safer for all of us and help prevent similar stories.

by Dr. Ken Rutherford, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Southwest Missouri State University

I went to Somalia with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) as part of the international humanitarian intervention. I hope that my Somali landmine experience can provide insights into the pain and suffering of the tens of thousands of landmine victims, both dead and alive, around the world. It expresses a real-life landmine nightmare. I first detailed my account in a testimony at the "Global Landmine Crisis" hearing before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1994, when Senator Patrick Leahy and his staff, notably Tim Reis, sought hard to alleviate the negative humanitarian effects of landmine use, including providing assistance to war victims, such as people injured by mines.

On December 16, 1993, my life was changed forever. My credit union staff in Lugh (located in the Gedo region, near the Ethiopian and Kenyan borders) decided to conduct site visits to legitimate time producers whose manufacturing locations were several miles outside of town. The four lime producers applied for the Landrover back seat, while the three directors and the union managers, Abdulrah Farah Ali, got in the front seat between my driver Abdurrahman and Somali counterpart Mohamed Hassen Duale.

About 10 minutes into our excursion, we were coming to a ridge of a small gully. Then the Landrover lurched forward a little, and the inside filled with dust. I slowly looked at Duale, whose face was covered with dust, then down to my feet. I saw a white bone sticking out where my right foot used to be. At first, I wondered if that was my bone or Duale's. It was mine.

My first instinct was to get out of the Landrover. But my lower legs were not working. I grabbed the steering wheel to pull myself out of the car, hitting the ground with my back. My hand-held radio landed several feet from me at the base of the passengers door behind the driver's side door. Fortunately, before getting in the Landrover at the credit union, I had attached my radio to my belt, rather than the usual practice of carrying it in my book bag at the base of my feet. I crawled for the radio, whereupon Abdulrah handed it to me. I remember saying four things after making the introductory call—"Kilo Romeo for Kilo Tango" (Kilo Romeo was my call sign, while Kilo Tango was the call sign for Ken Task, IRC Land Team Leader)—"I'm running over a landmine, I'm bleeding. I'm positive. Send for an airplane.

Afterwards, I asked Abdulrah to open the door, but it would not open, so I then crawled the few feet back to the driver's side door and used my arms to place my legs on the seat. Abdulrah adjusted my legs on the seat then tied tourniquets around both arms. A bone was sticking out where my right foot used to be. The actual foot itself was hanging by stretched skin towards my knee. Twice, I had a partial sit-up to see if I could reach up and hit the bottom of my foot with the back of my hand, hoping that it would flip up and over and protrude the bone. It kept falling back down. My left foot was still attached, I had lost the fourth toe and top part of my foot. Like an X-ray, I could see the bones going to the remaining toes. Abdulrah, unsure, stayed with me the whole time. During this time, I wasn't feeling any pain, I just felt uncomfortable. I knew that I was in a serious accident and that my right foot was gone forever.

Laying there in the hot Somali sun on the hard sandy ground covered with sharp rocks with my mutilated, bloody feet on the driver's seat—I had a smile on my face...

Up to this point, I never thought about dying, but I was thanking God for what a wonderful and blessed life I'd had. Great parents. The best of friends. The realization of a dream that I did the things that I wanted to do and that even what I was doing in Somalia was a dream. How many people have the opportunity to do what they dream of since childhood? What could be a better feeling than helping people start their lives again after the civil war? I enjoyed having the opportunity to physically visit each applicant's project site and help them. Some days, I couldn't believe that I was getting paid for what I was doing.

Soon, I spit up blood, and then I thought that due to possible internal injuries I could be dying and that every breath I took could be my last. The only sad thought I had was that I would not be able to marry Kim, my fiancée of two months and that we wouldn't have children. I dreamed, and hoped, would make a positive contribution to this world. I then resolved that if I could persuade my strength, energy and mind until I reached medical care, that I would live. I started breathing slowly and calming my self down. I never cried, screamed or moaned. As I spit up more blood and tried unsuccessfully to put my right foot back on, I asked God to let me live. I promised him that if I lived, I would pursue my real dreams: marrying Kim, having children with her and becoming a university professor. I looked up at Abdulrah and my other Somali staff and said that I enjoyed working with them and that we did our best.

I found out that help arrived around 30 minutes later. The first "rescue" down the ridge was Ken. I asked him if he could pull my right foot back on. I meant it in a humorous way because I already realized that it would be nearly impossible to have a normal foot again and that it hurt too much to cry.

He and the Somali rescuers picked me up in acradle position, holding my legs and arms beneath the shoulders, and then placed me in the back of a white pickup truck with my head on the lap of an Islamic Fundamentalsit soldier leaning against the back of the car while holding my head and his machine gun. My left hand was held by another soldier sitting on the side of the pickup truck with his gun as well. I remember looking up into his eyes, with both of us squinting each others hands. Ken was trying to keep my right foot on the leg while trying to maintain his balance in the bouncing truck. I remember thinking how great it was that Somali Islamic Fundamentalists were trying to save my life. Only sev­eral hundred miles away, in Mogadishu, they were trying to kill Americans. Here they were going over the same road where I had hit a landmine to get me to the hospital. Once I was placed in the truck, the pain set in. In the Lugh hospital courtyard I was loaded onto a metal roll­away cart, and taken into a medium-sized room. The room was full of Somali medical personnel, spectators and Tamer Morgan, an American nurse with extensive trauma experience. My forehead was being pressed down and men were holding down my arms and legs to keep me from moving too much. I kept struggling to deal with the pain and to cry and raise myself so that I could look at my mutilated feet. I could not believe that they were so destroyed.

About 30 minutes later, I was taken back out to the hospital courtyard, where the pickup truck had remained during my time at the hospital. Several men transferred me from the table to the truck. There was a roll bar across the back of the truck located above the tilitage. During the transfer I grabbed it with both hands for support. Before the transfer, I had felt the large numbers of people that had crowded into the hospital courtyard and beyond. I told myself not to make a face of agony, pain, fear or suffering, but to present a face that everything was OK—no problems. I didn’t want them to think that I was just another Amer­ican or international relief worker leaving the hospital out of fear or warning. Before the acci­dent, I wanted to prove that Americans and Somalis could work productively and cooperatively together to provide many with a new start in life and that the events in Mogadishu between Americans and Somalis had no influence over our work.

Lying in the back of the pickup, I remember Somalis touching my legs and arms saying "sorry." I thought to myself "Who is going to help these people? Who is going to continue the credit union work here? We have over 400 applications still to process for Lugh all these weeks?"

On the flight to Nairobi, I only re­member meandering and mumbling "Oh my God" so much from the pain that I thought the pilot and co-pilot were probably giving me a headache. In the plane, I almost died. To keep me alive, Tamera and a Belgium Doctor Joris
Irobi, and no one else but Irobi, was transported to one of the few medical facilities in the area. He was suffering from multiple injuries, including a broken leg, head trauma, and internal injuries. The medical staff was struggling to save his life, but they were short on resources and medical supplies. Irobi had been shot in the leg and was in severe pain. The medical team tried to stabilize him and transport him to a more advanced hospital, but the road was flooded with landmines and the medics had to proceed with caution. They finally reached the hospital, but Irobi's condition was critical. The medical staff worked tirelessly to save his life, but in the end, Irobi passed away from his injuries. His death was a tragic reminder of the ongoing conflict and the devastating impact it has on innocent civilians.

Irobi's family never forgot him. They kept his memory alive and continued to fight against the injustice he faced. They joined the Somalia Landmine Survivors Network (SLSN) and began advocating for better medical care and support for landmine survivors. They also became involved in the legal battle to hold those responsible for the landmine incident accountable.

In the years that followed, Irobi's family continued to work towards reconciliation and justice. They traveled the world speaking out about the dangers of landmines and the importance of preventing such incidents from happening again. They were tireless in their advocacy for the rights of landmine survivors and their families.

Today, Irobi's memory lives on through the work of the Somalia Landmine Survivors Network and other organizations dedicated to preventing landmine disasters and supporting those affected by them. His family's determination and courage continue to inspire others to take action against the injustice and suffering that landmines cause.

Irobi's story is a reminder of the importance of compassion and empathy in the face of tragedy. It is a testament to the power of community and the resilience of the human spirit. Through the work of organizations like the Somalia Landmine Survivors Network, we can honor Irobi's memory and work towards a future where no one has to face the loss and suffering he endured.

Irobi's legacy continues to inspire us all to fight against the violence and injustice that continue to affect so many communities around the world.