AMATC: Sustainable Solutions for Humanitarian Mine Action

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Clear Path International

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AMATC: Sustainable Solutions for Humanitarian Mine Action

Kabul’s Afghan Mine Action Technology Center employs disabled deminers to create demining products. AMATC donates part of its revenue to local physical rehabilitation and treatment facilities, and now employs 11 disabled employees full time.

While clearing unexploded ordnance in Afghanistan’s Herat province, due to a small, inadvertent error, Haroon Khan* lost his right hand and a means of steady employment for the next several years.

“With my right leg, I accidentally kicked a stone,” recalls the 30-year-old native of Eastern Afghanistan’s Nangarhar province. “It set off the mine.”

After he received emergency medical care and, later, a prosthetic arm, Khan remained unemployed for six difficult years. He was forced to borrow money from relatives and others to survive. During that time, however, he took the opportunity to finish his high school education and in early 2008 received a unique opportunity to go back to work.

Clear Path International, a humanitarian mine-action nonprofit organization based in the United States, had just formed the Afghan Mine Action Technology Center in Kabul to offer employment to disabled deminers by creating products designed to be used by the demining industry. In an effort to build up a staff, Afghan demining organizations were asked to suggest possible employees. Khan was nominated and became AMATC’s first technician.

Today, Khan oversees procurement of materials needed to produce the dozen-plus products sold to commercial and nonprofit demining outfits throughout Afghanistan. His AMATC income allows him to travel the three-hour trip of 175 kilometers (109 miles) back to his home each weekend and to support his wife, two children and five nephews. AMATC has “a very holistic approach to making the amputees able to support their families, and their communities in Afghanistan and other mine-affected parts of the world,” notes Roberta Burns, the Kabul-based Foreign Service Officer for the Office of Weapons Removal and De-mining in the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), which funds CPI’s work with victims of wartime explosives, their families, and their communities in Afghanistan and other mine-affected parts of the world.

Conceived by CPI and its subcontractor, Elegant Design and Solutions, AMATC also generates revenue from product sales to sustain its operation, and to support local physical rehabilitation and treatment facilities such as the Kabul Orthopedic Organization, one of CPI’s nine implementing partners in Afghanistan.

“It [is] excellent social entrepreneurship,” says Burns. “It [is] exactly what we’re looking to do in Afghanistan.”

The center’s team leader is one of 11 men employed by AMATC since 2008.

All photos courtesy of Gehn Fujii/AMATC.

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For Khan, who has become an unofficial AMATC poster child, the center has been a lifesaver—a means of regaining the dignity he lost after his injury. He is fond of reciting the CPI motto that “disability is not inability.” He means it. “Before I had very great depression,” he says. “Now, I don’t have [to feel that way].”

Eleven employees now depend on AMATC for a monthly wage. Besides Khan, there are five technicians, two machinists, one team leader, a driver and a custodian. CPI and AMATC hope to increase employment as production and sales grow.

In keeping with the center’s mission as an employment program for persons with disabilities, 75 percent of AMATC workers are disabled. Disabled candidates are encouraged to apply for work no matter their disability, as manufacturing tools, procedures and workstations can be modified to accommodate the person’s disability.

“Our newest machinist has developed tools especially for disabled staff,” says Fujii, noting that one technician’s prosthetic was retrofitted to allow him to hold a welding rod and mask.

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* see endnotes page 81

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Married to CPI Co-founder Imbert Matte, Karen Reed-Matthee has been involved in the periphery of the organization since it began and has visited Clear Path programs in Afghanistan and Vietnam. Since May 2010, she has been on staff as Director of Communications, bringing more than 20 years of experience as a writer and editor for large metropolitan newspapers, National Public Radio and a number of magazines to Clear Path. She is the co-founder of a Seattle-based magazine devoted to women’s health and financial well-being. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of California, Berkeley, and she has a master’s degree in journalism from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. She and her husband have a 15-year-old son, Niko.