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## Basra, Iraq, Prosthetics Project

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# Basra, Iraq Prosthetics Project

The Basra, Iraq Prosthetics Project has given new hope to the many amputees in Iraq. With thousands already affected by the aftermath of landmines and other explosive remnants of war<sup>1</sup> in Iraq, the Basra Prosthetics Project is dedicated to giving amputees their independence and futures back, literally one step at a time.

by Leah Young [ Mine Action Information Center ]

Landmines and other explosive remnants of war have caused an alarmingly high number of amputees throughout Iraq. The current status of health care in Iraq is not adequate for assisting these people, leaving them immobile and without hope. In response, Linda Smythe of the Montgomery Village (Maryland) Rotary Club founded the Basra, Iraq Prosthetics Project, which aims to assist amputees and their families by providing the training, equipment, prosthetic supplies and resources needed to improve their situation.

## Background

The Ministry of Health in Iraq estimates that there are “approximately 80,000 amputees of whom some 75 to 85 percent reportedly were caused by mines or unexploded ordnance.”<sup>2</sup> Many of the wounded are innocent children and women who are completely disconnected from the war.<sup>3</sup> Recently, the leaders of the Basra, Iraq, Prosthetics Project hypothesized that, assuming no new cases, it would take 20 to 30 years to fully and adequately care medically for the current survivors in Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

Being an amputee in Iraq has very different connotations from these it has in developed areas of the world. Since it is not a “wheelchair friendly” country with paved roads and other necessities for wheelchair transportation and accessibility, becoming disabled in this nation is a serious setback; it means a total loss of independence for the survivor. Once you are an amputee in Iraq, “you’ve lost your mobility; you’ve lost your future,” according to Linda Smythe.<sup>4</sup> With no way to get around, survivors cannot support themselves and their families. Also, since high numbers of these amputees are children, there is a loss of education as well as mobility.<sup>3</sup>

Iraq lacks enough medical centers to treat the disabled people of its nation.<sup>5</sup> Due to the current conflict in Iraq, many health-care centers have been destroyed or damaged, and others have been forced to shut down.<sup>3</sup> The medical centers that do exist throughout Iraq do not have sufficient orthopedic doctors or specialists trained in orthotics or prosthetics available to help the overwhelming number of amputees regain their mobility. Additionally, these centers are under-supplied.

## The Project

Linda Smythe founded the Basra, Iraq Prosthetics Project in 2004 because she wanted to give amputees their lives and futures back by giving them the ability to walk again.<sup>4</sup> Smythe had a special connection with the Middle East, having lived there for over 18 years where she served as Greece’s Head of Mission in Bahrain in the capacity of Honorary Consul.

She was also involved in another Rotary International District project, “Friendship Initiatives with the Arab World.”<sup>5</sup> This project and many other Rotary Club programs were designed to foster understanding



Jameela, who had both legs amputated as a result of an endocrinological disease, works with specialists on rehabilitation.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALBERT HESS OF THE PIKESVILLE-OWINGS MILL, MARYLAND, ROTARY CLUB

and friendship between U.S. and Arab societies.<sup>6</sup> As a result of her background, she had many connections and relationships in the area, which made her a good candidate to develop the project.

“I just felt the need to do something that would help the civilian amputee population who are innocent victims. There is no end in sight to the growing number of amputees, given the number of landmines and the current circumstances in Iraq,” says Smythe. “We need to help them if we are able.”<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this project is to enable the Iraqi Ministry of Health to have a greater impact on amputee victims by providing training to doctors and prosthetists who work in the Basra Prosthetic Centre, thereby offering better treatment and more effective aid to the landmine/ERW survivors. The project also provides the materials and technologies necessary to help the facility manufacture prostheses and help amputee victims become mobile.<sup>5</sup>

Partnering with the Amman (Jordan) Cosmopolitan Rotary club, the Basra, Iraq Prosthetics Project and the Al Hussein Society of Habilitation/Rehabilitation of the Physically Challenged, located in Jordan, will conduct a training program for doctors and prosthetists. They are currently preparing the curriculum for the program, which is to extend over the next three years.<sup>6</sup> Due to the war and the Iraq government’s instability, it is unsafe for the training to take place in Iraq<sup>4</sup> Princess Majda Raad of Jordan is the Honorary Patronness for the project, saying that this project not only “reflects dedication to a great humanitarian need but also brings together in friendship and compassion the people of Iraq, Jordan and the United States.”<sup>5</sup>

Another aspect of the Basra, Iraq Prosthetics Project, based at the Montgomery Village Rotary Club in the United States, focuses on col-



Pictured here is 11-year-old Mohamed, whose site of amputation was so high that he has no "stump" on which to affix the prosthesis. He was run over by an Iraqi military vehicle and left for dead on the side of the road.

lecting used prosthetic limbs from those who do not use them anymore. It is illegal in the United States to reuse prosthetic limbs; consequently, the project aims to collect these retired limbs for parts in building new limbs for amputees in Iraq. The main reason Iraqis are unable to obtain prostheses is a lack of supplies, equipment and production capacity. In addition, the cost of a prosthetic limb is far more than an Iraqi family earns in a year; the used limbs will be very helpful in reducing the costs of the process.<sup>4</sup> Through the efforts of Rotary clubs and Hanger Orthopedic Group, Inc. of Bethesda, Maryland, a "national limb drive" was set up in 2003 to collect these used prosthetic limbs.<sup>5</sup> Although Rotary continues to facilitate this program, Hanger Orthopedic Group is no longer involved.

#### Funding

The project is a Rotary International, District #7620 project that includes 71 clubs in Washington, D.C. and central Maryland; it is managed and supported by Rotary clubs

throughout the United States and worldwide. All of the money the clubs collect for the project goes directly to funding the project, not to salaries, since the project is run entirely by volunteers.

The U.S. Department of State's Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement granted US\$200,000 to the project for 2007 and 2008, and in November 2007, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs allotted an additional \$1.5 million to be used to "provide prosthetic supplies to the project."<sup>6</sup>

#### Conclusion

A lack of health care and survivor assistance services creates many obstacles for innocent civilians who become victims of war violence in Iraq. However, The Basra, Iraq, Prosthetics Project is creating an opportunity for landmine survivors in Iraq to regain their lives again by providing this much-needed assistance. With increased funding, the project can now expand to provide aid to a wider range of survivors. ♦

See Endnotes, page 110



**Leah Young** has been working at the *Journal of Mine Action* since January 2008. She is from Virginia Beach, Virginia, and attends James Madison University where she is pursuing a Bachelor of Science in justice studies with a minor in Spanish.

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