AMATC: Sustainable Solutions for Humanitarian Mine Action

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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.

by Karen Reed-Matthee [Clear Path International]

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 a staff, Afghan demining organizations were asked to suggest possible employees. Khan was nominated to become 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) home each weekend and to support his wife, two children, and five nieces. AMATC has “a very holistic mission,” says Roberta Burns, the Kabul-based Foreign Service Officer for the Office of Weapons Removal and Mine Action, “It’s 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 tools are field-tested by actual deminers on real mines and are certified by the Mine Action Coordination Center of Afghanistan, says AMATC Project Manager Ehsanullah Khan. As an example, he notes that the center’s modular prodder, put through an anti-personnel mine blast, stayed intact. “It did not fragment,” Ehsan says.

Last summer, AMATC won its first large contract (valued at US$244,000) from the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan. The center will continue pursuing these types of orders, it also will work on building product stock to sell off the shelf. While these huge contract-based orders are important, they are “not ideal from a sustainability standpoint,” Fuji says. “There’s no month-to-month cash flow.”

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,” Fuji says, noting that one technician’s prosthesis was retrofitted to allow him to hold a welding rod and mask.

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].” + see endnotes page 81