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The Yemen Association for Landmine and UXO Survivors

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The Yemen Association for Landmine and UXO Survivors

Since its creation in September 2004 by the Yemen Executive Mine Action Centre, the Yemen Association for Landmine and UXO Survivors has played an active role in raising awareness of mine-affected areas and in promoting socioeconomic reintegration of mine/unexploded ordnance survivors through educational programs.¹ Currently, YALS and YEMAC are working together with the goal of reintegrating 500 survivors by 2009.

by Anne Capelle [Independent Consultant]

In 2004, Yemeni landmine survivors Saleh Mohsen Al-Dahyani and Sabaa Al-Garadi were preparing themselves for their first trip abroad. They had been chosen to participate in the Landmine Survivors Network's² "Raising the Voices" training in Geneva. A bit anxious, they didn't know what to expect but were at the same time excited for the opportunity to travel, discover the world and meet other landmine survivors.

A few weeks earlier, Al-Dahyani had gone to YEMAC to ask for assistance; he needed a new prosthesis. Al-Dahyani met with Mansour Al-Ezzi, the director of the center, who was impressed by Al-Dahyani's energy to go on with his life, find a job and get married after the accident that cost him his legs. Al-Ezzi had long been concerned about the situation of landmine survivors in Yemen and believed there was a need for a local organization to bring survivors' needs to the attention of the authorities. He said to Al-Dahyani, "What would you think if I gave you a job that would change your life and would make you happy because you would be able to help other survivors?" Al-Dahyani's first answer was, "I have a job and I am happy." A few days later, however, Al-Dahyani came back and said, "I will do it, not for my family or myself, but for the survivors."

Al-Ezzi met Sabaa Al-Garadi a few days after the accident that resulted in the loss of both of her legs. She was still a very young woman and felt that her life had been destroyed. When Al-Ezzi suggested that she work for other survivors, she felt energized but was concerned about her family's reactions. In Yemen, unmarried women cannot leave their villages; regardless, Sabaa Al-Garadi really wanted to go to the city, feeling that there was no future for her in the village. She asked Al-Ezzi to discuss it with her parents.

"I still remember the long meeting with her parents," recalls Al-Ezzi. "They finally agreed to let her come to the Yemeni capital of Sana'a on the condition that I would take care of her as a father would. I agreed and from that day on, I have been proud to be a father to this girl and to hear her call me 'father.'"

The trip to Geneva was the first step of Al-Dahyani's and Al-Garadi's new life. From the moment they arrived, a new world opened to them. The experience not only made them realize the strong physical differences between Europe and the Arab world, but it also allowed them to share 10 days with other landmine survivors. They met others who were experiencing the same life difficulties and the same suffering. They also learned about their rights; that being a survivor didn't make them less human, that they were equal to all other people, and that they have the right to speak to express their suffering and call for changes to improve their situation. A few days after the training, Al-Dahyani and Al-Garadi met with diplomats at the Intersessional Standing Committee of the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention.³ In the meeting, the two



Al-Garadi and Al-Dahyani taking their first computer class with the ICBL Webmaster in Geneva in 2004.

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presented diplomats with important messages on the need to increase accessibility for persons with disabilities and to develop more economic reintegration programs. They also spoke with various diplomats informally, describing the situation of landmine survivors in Yemen.

Following their exchange with the diplomats, Al-Dahyani and Al-Garadi were soon on the return flight home. During the first weeks after their return to Yemen, the two told others what they had seen and done in Geneva, and started to wonder how their experience could

help other Yemeni survivors. They met with friends from the national mine-action center and with other survivors, feeling that they must do something in Yemen to help other survivors recover hope and self-confidence, and to improve their situations. Ultimately, an idea was born between the two, to create the Yemeni Association for Landmine Survivors, also known as YALS. On 1 September 2004, the association was established under the sponsorship of the Yemen Executive Mine Action Centre. In the creation of this new association, care was taken to adhere to the principle that the association be run and managed by landmine survivors for survivors and other persons with disabilities.

Vision, Mission and Methods

The association endorsed Al-Dahyani's and Al-Garadi's vision of a Yemen where the rights of persons with disabilities are met. The mission of the association is to increase and improve the inclusion of landmine survivors and other persons with disabilities in society along two main tracks:

1. Working with survivors to help them identify and meet their needs through:
 - Social and psychological support
 - Assistance to meet health and rehabilitation needs
 - Professional training
 - Projects such as telecommunication centers, sewing centers and workshops
 - Support for the establishment and follow-up of small businesses
 - Encouragement and support for the education of survivors' children and young people
2. Working with society and the authorities to change negative attitudes toward people with disabilities and to remove barriers to their integration through:
 - Encouraging school inclusion and access to professional training
 - Encouraging state companies to employ persons with disabilities
 - Conducting awareness-raising activities on the rights of persons with disabilities

In November 2004, Al-Dahyani and Al-Garadi went to Nairobi, Kenya, for the First Review Conference of the Ottawa Convention. There, they learned about the situation of persons with disabilities in an African country. Together with more than 50 survivors gathered by LSN from around the world, they advocated for more and better victim assistance. They continued to share experiences with survivors from Ukraine, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Cambodia, Nepal, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, to mention a few. With this experience, notes taken from their exchanges and a list of new contacts, they returned home with a remarkable energy.

During the next three years, Al-Dahyani and Al-Garadi developed projects aimed at a comprehensive and global approach for persons with disabilities. These projects centered around three interlinked actions:

1. Providing peer support through home visits with survivors and their families, problem-solving discussions with them about their needs, and informing them about the rights of persons with disabilities



Celebration of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities at the First Review Conference of the Ottawa Convention in Nairobi, Kenya, 3 December 2004. In front, from left to right, are Habbouba Aoun of the Lebanon Campaign to Ban Landmines, former LSN Regional Coordinator for the Middle East Mona Abdeljawad, Director of LSN-Jordan and landmine survivor Adnan Al Aboudi, author Anne Capelle, and YALS member and landmine survivor Saleh Al-Dhahiani.

2. Giving vocational training based on the survivor's choice and follow-up support to assist the establishment of the new income-generating activity or to assist the job search
3. Encouraging access to education and assisting survivors to go to school, including providing support to bring survivors to town for education not available in the villages

The program has a specific focus on girls with disabilities who typically remain hidden in the village houses. Thanks to the association's activities, many families have been convinced to allow their girls to continue to pursue an education in order to earn income in the future.

The organization also conducts awareness-raising activities on the Ottawa Convention and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*⁴ in relation to the Yemeni national law on disability. This advocacy includes encouraging the implementation of the law that requires that 5 percent of public employees be persons with disabilities. Though tough in spirit, this law is rarely implemented.

YALS focuses much of its activity on survivors living in rural areas. The organization's staff visits rural areas to collect data about survivors and their needs, to meet with survivors and their families, and to establish local branches of the association that then implement projects. The association is based in Sana'a and some activities such as training and school support are carried out there. To date, YALS has rented office and training space but doing so is expensive and not completely suitable. In 2008, the goal is for YALS to build its own building on a piece of ground received from the government. The building will combine the offices and training center, as well as a guesthouse for trainees, trainers and girls going to school in the capital.

Membership, Governance and Funding

YALS is a membership-based organization and, at the end of 2007, it was composed of 280 members (70 women and 210 men). Though the organization functions under the auspices of YEMAC and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, YALS maintains a regulatory body or general assembly of members that elects a board of seven directors, all survivors, who are charged with the responsibility of

managing the association. Though the seven board members are elected by the General Assembly, they are full-time paid staff, as is the custom in Yemen. The YALS staff is comprised of 27 persons: 10 women and 17 men. Seventeen staff members are survivors. There is also an internal monitoring committee composed of three members, all survivors and not part of the staff, who are elected by the YALS General Assembly. A legal accountant periodically reviews the financial records of the organization. Saleh Al-Dahyani is currently Chairman of the Board and Sabaa Al-Garadi is the Secretary.

The association is funded by the Embassy of Japan and the National Mine Action Committee,⁶ which covers some of the salaries. In order to develop its projects, YALS needs new donors.

The program started in 2004 and as of the end of 2007, 180 survivors—45 women and 135 men—have directly benefited from it. In 2008, YALS wants to open two new branches in remote areas most impacted by landmines and explosive remnants of war.⁵ Additional objectives for YALS include helping 100 survivors in 2008, and increasing this number

in future years while continuing to follow the survivors who benefited from the project in previous years.

Conclusion

As a defining summary of the accomplishments and potential of YALS, I refer to a statement made by Al-Garadi:

“After I got hit by the mine, the world became dark and everything that was nice and beautiful became ugly and tasteless; but after I worked in YALS, everything changed again, but this time for the better. Before the accident, I was a girl from a village and I was ignorant. After I had the chance to go to Sana’a, to continue my education and to travel in the world, I’m thankful to the accident because it made me an educated woman and I feel happiness I never sensed before, as I help other survivors and bring hope to other girls.”

The Yemen Association for Landmine and UXO Survivors has made a difference in the lives of many Yemini landmine survivors like those discussed here. It is expanding to new areas in Yemen and spreading its assistance to even more survivors. ♦

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Anne Capelle is an independent consultant and trained physiotherapist whose experience over a decade with patients in refugee camps and with mine-action efforts inspired her not only to communicate about survivors’ needs but also to train survivors to advocate on their own behalf. She has worked with Handicap International and the *Landmine Monitor*. Capelle has also worked with other organizations, including the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and Landmine Survivors Network (now Survivor Corps).

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News Brief

Gunmen in Afghanistan Kill Seven Demining Staff

In two separate attacks by gunmen in Afghanistan in late March, seven demining staff members were killed and several others injured. In the first incident, gunmen stopped a convoy of deminers from Afghan Technical Consultants returning from work in Jawzjan province, opening fire and killing five deminers. Seven people were injured in this incident. The convoy included an ambulance.

In the second attack, a vehicle carrying demining staff was attacked by gunmen, who killed the driver and a deminer from the Mine Detection and Dog Centre. Officials were uncertain if the attack was related to a private hostility or militant activities.

These incidents are just a couple in a growing number of reports in Afghanistan concerning increased violence from insurgent forces.