

**Standing Committee on Victim Assistance and Socio-Economic
Reintegration (SC-VA)**

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION OF MINE SURVIVORS
THE EXPERIENCE OF
AFGHAN AMPUTEE BICYCLISTS FOR REHABILITATION AND
RECREATION (AABRAR)**

Presented by

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Madam Co-Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the socio-economic reintegration activities of my organization, the Afghan Amputee Bicyclists for Rehabilitation and Recreation.

As we heard, it is estimated that Afghanistan has in excess of 100,000 mine survivors. About one third are under the age of 18 and as many as 10 percent are women and girls.¹ Added to these numbers are the tens of thousands of people that have disabilities from other causes or war-related injuries. It is also estimated that 84 percent of disabled persons in Afghanistan are unemployed and 80 to 85 percent are illiterate. For people with a disability in Afghanistan, life is very hard and a lot of work needs to be done to ensure that the assistance available to them is adequate.

I will start by telling you the story of one young man who came through our program. When he was 18 years-old he stepped on a landmine and lost both legs. At the time he was engaged to be married but the young woman's parents refused to allow

¹ Dr M Haider Reza, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Transitional State of Afghanistan, statement to the Standing Committee on Mine Clearance, Mine Risk Education and Mine Action Technologies, Geneva, 21 June 2004.

the wedding to go ahead and broke off the engagement. How could a man with no legs support their daughter? This young man joined our program and was trained to repair bicycles. He opened a repair workshop and before long was earning a good living. The young woman's parent heard about his success and agreed once more that he could marry their daughter. Now at the age of 26 he is happily married with 2 young children and a successful business to support his family.

I established AABRAR in August 1992 in Jalalabad with the idea of teaching disabled people to ride bicycles so they could travel independently. In 2002 the program expanded to Kabul. A bicycle is in itself an assistive device similar to a wheelchair as it enables mobility but also improves physical strength through exercise and in many cases extends the usable life of an artificial limb. AABRAR focuses on the physical rehabilitation and socio-economic integration of people with a disability into their communities. Since 1992, more than 25,000 disabled people have benefited from the programs offered; the majority of beneficiaries are mine survivors. AABRAR employs 95 staff; 60 percent are people with a disability.

In addition to providing physiotherapy services, health education, mine awareness, and literacy training to more than 3,000 people a year, AABRAR'S main activities include a bicycle training program for disabled men and boys to teach them how to ride and repair bicycles according to their individual ability. About 600 men and boys are trained each year. Graduates receive a bicycle at the end of their training which can be used for transport to work or school, or as a mobile shop to sell drinks or small items of food or other goods. A bicycle costs about \$55.

For disabled women and girls, AABRAR offers vocational training programs in carpet weaving, embroidery, ball making and tailoring. About 80 to 100 women and girls are trained each year. Graduates receive a sewing machine and raw materials at the end of the program as a means to generate income to support their families and

become self reliant. A sewing machine costs \$26 to \$30. The products made are sold in local markets. For those trained in ball-making no equipment is needed except for needles and there is also the potential for the women to train other family members at home. A football costs about 80 Afghanis to make and sells in the market for between 180 and 200 Afghanis each so it is possible to make a good income. Last year, 15 graduates were employed to establish a tailoring workshop in Kabul. The women were very happy recently to get a contract from the British Embassy in Kabul to make 150 food bags and 12 jackets. We are also negotiating with UN-MACA for a contract to make the uniforms for the 8,000 deminers in Afghanistan. This would mean making about 16,000 units and provide employment for many women.

In Kabul in 2003, the Disabled Cycle Messenger Service started with 15 graduates from the bicycle training program and three support staff. All the messengers are amputees and mostly landmine survivors. DCMS provides courier services including the pick up and delivery of letters and parcels at a cost of 25 Afghanis (about 50 cents) or pizza delivery at 50 Afghanis (about \$1). Messengers are paid about \$100 a month. We believe that the messenger service could be self-sufficient in 2 to 3 years. To become self-sufficient we need to raise awareness of our services and we would be pleased if you have a mission in Kabul you could tell them to use our services.

AABRAR also encourages recreation and social participation through its annual bicycle race on the International Day of Disabled Persons on 3 December and participation in international sporting events for disabled persons including the Golden Jubilee Cycle Race in Pakistan, the Cycle Messenger World Championships, and Cycling for Peace in Germany. The Afghan Paralympic Federation was established on 14 February this year and will be sending two athletes and one assistant to Athens. Qaher, one of our employees in the messenger service, is a 22-year old mine survivor and double below knee amputee who will compete in the cycling and Marina, a young

14-year old girl will be competing in the running. This marks the first time that an Afghan woman has participated in the Paralympic Games. We thank Norway for their financial support in sending the athletes to a training camp in August but we need more help to buy Qaher a racing bicycle and to finance the expenses of an extra person to travel with them to act as a translator and support.

While we are proud of the achievements of our program – 80 percent of our graduates gain employment or are earning an income – there is still much that needs to be done. In Kabul, we have a three-year waiting list of people that want training and in Jalalabad there is a two-year wait. There is also a need to expand the geographic reach of our program with training workshops in Herat in the west, in Khandahar in the south, and Mazar-i-Sharif in the north. And there is a demand for training in other skills including computers, watch making, motor vehicle mechanics, and TV repairs.

There are high rates of unemployment in Afghanistan, which makes it even more difficult for mine survivors and other persons with disabilities to find suitable employment. But it is not impossible, particularly if opportunities are made available for mine survivors to receive vocational training or access income generation programs. This is what we try to achieve at AABRAR but we, and other organizations in mine-affected countries, cannot do this without your support.

The positive benefits of supporting the socio-economic reintegration of mine survivors cannot be understated. Not only does vocational training and access to income generating activities empower the individual to resume their role as a productive member of their family and community, it means that they will not remain as lifelong dependents and therefore reduces pressure on existing social services.

I would now like to show you a short video on the work of our program.

Thank you for your attention.