Helping Syrians stand tall again

NEWS

“I was walking and then all of a sudden I was up in the air,” recalls Mohamad, a 32-year-old father, of the moment he was injured in Syria. “I never heard the missile coming or the explosion. When the doctors saw my injuries they told me I would probably die. But this was not an option for me—I had to survive for my two-year-old son. The doctors managed to save my life, but my left leg had to be amputated. When we arrived in Lebanon, I was unable to move.”

Mohamad is counted among more than one million people injured in the Syrian conflict, now entering its fifth year. Tens of thousands of Syrians now require artificial limbs, braces, and long-term rehabilitation care.

Handicap International has deployed 600 staff to respond to the needs of people with injuries, disabilities, chronic conditions, and psychological trauma caught in the Syria crisis. The operation is the largest and most complex in Handicap International’s history.

In September 2014, Handicap International staff in Lebanon heard about Mohamad’s case and began providing him with physical therapy so that he could regain the strength and balance needed to wear an artificial leg.

“At every session, the impossible becomes possible,” says Mohamad. “When I was fitted with my prosthesis, my physical therapist Binan said ‘stand up’. I said, ‘how?’ But she encouraged me, and then I did.”

Shortly thereafter, Mohamad took his first steps without the aid of crutches. “I felt like a little boy—I wanted to run,” says Mohamad. “The support I receive from Binan and the other Handicap International staff is absolutely crucial. They never treat me like I’m less of a person because of my injury, they simply act like I’m a person who needs a little help to get his independence back.”

Since the launch of operations in Jordan and Lebanon in 2012, Handicap International has continued to scale-up activities, expanding its response in Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan. Thanks to our donors, teams have supplied aid to more than 360,000 people, and fitted more than 2,700 people with prostheses and orthoses.

Yet, for each success story like Mohamad’s, there are dozens more Syrians with serious injuries and disabilities who have not been reached.

“The situation inside Syria has worsened over the past year, both in terms of protecting civilians and access to humanitarian aid,” says Anne Héry, Handicap International’s advocacy director. “We need to do everything possible to ensure there’s an opening so that we can reduce the physical and psychological suffering of people living in Syria.”
Fighting the Ebola epidemic

Handicap International ensures access to treatment centers and information about disease prevention

EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Despite an overall reduction in the number of Ebola cases in West Africa, Handicap International remains dedicated to helping end the epidemic. Since December 2014, the organization has operated a fleet of 30 ambulances to transport people suffering from Ebola symptoms to treatment centers in Sierra Leone. Decontamination teams traveling with the ambulances disinfect the areas where the infected people are staying to protect their family members and friends from getting sick. More than 1,500 people have been able to access treatment as a result of this service. Staff also conduct awareness-raising campaigns that target people with special needs, including people with disabilities, people with HIV and AIDS, and children. These groups are often excluded from other campaigns because they cannot attend information sessions or the information is provided in a format they cannot understand. Deaf people are particularly uniformed.

Once the epidemic ends, Handicap International plans to help communities that have experienced great hardship by providing psychological and social support.

Handicap International has transported more than 1,500 people to Ebola treatment centers.

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Note from the Executive Director

As a valued member of the Handicap International family, this issue of The Next Step should inspire you and demonstrate the remarkable impact of your generosity.

Together, we have brought strength and hope to more than 360,000 Syrian refugees caught up in this four-year-old emergency—Handicap International’s largest response in 33 years of action.

Yet, amid such an acute crisis in the Middle East, your generosity has allowed colleagues in the field to continue supporting and empowering people with disabilities in more than 55 other countries. It is heart-warming to celebrate the amazing strides made by children such as Sanu (page 3) in Nepal, and Kanha (below) in Cambodia.

As I begin my work as Executive Director of Handicap International U.S., I am inspired to know that we—and the people we support—have dedicated donors like you by our side.

Thank you for being a part of each of these rebuilt lives.

Jeff Meer
Executive Director
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EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Kanha: Trauma to triumph in Cambodia

Kanha was playing in her family’s courtyard when her father accidentally set off a bomb he thought was a harmless piece of scrap metal. The impact of the explosion killed him instantly and tore Kanha’s right leg to shreds. Kanha’s mother rushed her to the hospital, where her leg was amputated. A year after the accident, Kanha attended Handicap International’s orthopedic workshop in Kompong Cham, where staff gave her crutches and physical therapy, and fit her with an artificial leg.

Fitted with new prostheses as she grows, Kahna is able to keep up with other kids, and even climb mango trees. Because the nearest school to Kanha’s home is more than 12 miles away, Handicap International provided Kanha’s mother with a motorbike so that she can take Kanha to school every day.

See Kanha today, and hear her story in our newest video:

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Locked away for years, Nepalese girl tastes freedom

Like many people with disabilities in Nepal, Sanu was hidden at home without treatment until Handicap International found her and provided her with rehabilitation.

**Sanu walks through the streets of Kathmandu on her way to Handicap International’s rehabilitation center.**

**Sanu, 14, flips through the pages of her sketchbook and shyly shows the colorful flowers she has been drawing. She has pages and pages of artwork—drawing has been her sole pastime for years. Born in rural Nepal with a deformed right foot and missing her left leg, Sanukanchi spent much of her life locked inside her home, crawling on her hands and knees. Mocked and shunned by her community, Sanukanchi could not imagine that one day she might be more than a pariah.

Sanukanchi, or Sanu, was raised in a mountain village by poor, illiterate parents. She was born with a clubfoot, but her condition was never treated. Things got worse when she was nine years old. “I was playing outside one day and cut my healthy left leg,” says Sanu. “My mother, who was widowed and had two other children to care for, didn’t have the money to take me to a doctor so the wound became infected. The infection festered and so eventually I went to the doctor. He said my leg needed to be cut off to save my life. I remember that day as if it were yesterday. I was so incredibly sad.”

Sanu’s life changed drastically. Her deformed right foot prevented her from hopping on one leg, so it was impossible to walk with crutches. She had to drop out of school and stay home. “I could only crawl,” she remembers. “I made drawings to pass the time. In the beginning, I felt miserable because I couldn’t leave the house. After a while, I didn’t want to go outside anymore. People made fun of me and the other children bullied me.”

In 2013, a Handicap International disability outreach worker discovered her. Working in Nepal for 15 years, Handicap International has provided more than 46,000 Nepalese people with disabilities with physical therapy, artificial limbs, assistive devices like wheelchairs, and other rehabilitation services.

The worker who found Sanu remembers being shocked by the girl’s condition: “I couldn’t believe what I saw. Sanu was on the floor, too afraid to even look at me.”

She brought Sanu to Kathmandu for surgery so she could receive an artificial leg for her left leg. She was also given a brace to help her walk with her right leg.

Today, after years of struggle, Sanu is finally able to stand up straight and walk. She goes to school and is proud of it, even though her classmates are much younger than she is. She still needs physical therapy on a regular basis, and so remains in Kathmandu. She lives with 15 other girls with disabilities in a home managed by the local NGO, Voice of Creative Disabled Nepal. “I’m comfortable here because no one makes fun of me,” says Sanu. “Of course I miss my mom, but we both know I need the rehabilitation. My mother is so proud of me.”

Three months ago, Sanu went to her village to visit her family. “Everyone was stunned to see me walking,” says Sanu. “They couldn’t believe their eyes. That moment gave me the boost I needed—I realized that I could achieve something in life and I suddenly felt very strong.”

Since then, Sanu has been working harder than ever at her rehabilitation exercises. Her next goal is to walk long distances without crutches. Meanwhile, she’s still drawing. On the final page of her sketchbook, there’s a portrait of herself and her best friend—a girl who lives with her and uses a wheelchair. The drawing shows them both walking and posing like movie stars. “This is my dream,” she says. “Sometimes I feel sad about what happened to me. But I know how far I’ve come. And when I look in the mirror, I’m very proud of myself.”

This vital work is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).
From Navy pilot to peace-maker

DONOR REFLECTION

Patrick Wheary, a retired U.S. Navy pilot who flew during the Vietnam War, became a Handicap International donor after learning about our demining work in Laos. In the reflection below, he explains his incredible connection to Laos, and why he is dedicated to helping rid the country of deadly cluster bombs.

In 1969, I was a 26-year-old United States Navy pilot flying a single-engine jet fighter attack aircraft, the A-7 Corsair II, off the USS Enterprise during the Vietnam War. My fellow Navy aviators and I loved flying, and an assignment to an aircraft carrier required extremely high aviation skills. We regarded our assignments as an honor, although we faced difficult and dangerous missions 24/7. We were highly trained and focused. Flying was our life.

Our missions took us over South and North Vietnam, and sometimes over Laos. Our mission was to intercept North Vietnamese regular Army forces and transports advancing to South Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. These forces were attacking U.S. and Army of the Republic of Vietnam personnel in the South.

Onboard the aircraft carrier, we were introduced to a new type of weapon known as a cluster bomb. Unlike other bombs, cluster bombs are filled with smaller bomblets that disperse over a wide area. I assumed at the time that if they didn’t find a target, the bomblets would disarm or self-destruct after a few weeks. At age 26, facing death on a daily basis, I didn’t have much reason to consider the potential long-term impact of these weapons. Perhaps I was naive.

But the evidence of war was still very present. I met about a dozen people in Laos who had lost limbs after stepping on cluster bombs. They didn’t all explode on impact, and they may last for decades.

Unfortunately, there are still millions of them left in Laos. Today, totally innocent people, just walking through the jungle, may lose an arm or a leg—even their lives—to a cluster bomb. And they do.

Recently, I returned to Vietnam and Laos as a volunteer teacher. The people I met literally wrapped their arms around me as a new friend—they did not see me as a former enemy.

Back home, my good friend Lynn Bradach, who serves as a Handicap International “Ban Advocate,” encouraged me to finally speak out and raise awareness about the bombs we left in Laos, and do something for injured Laotians. Lynn lost her son, Travis, a U.S. Marine, to a cluster bomb accident in Iraq in 2003. This connection led me to join Lynn in her efforts to ban cluster bombs.

She’s also the reason I became a Handicap International donor. Through her, I learned that Handicap International has worked to help victims and clear cluster bombs in Laos since 1983. The organization also supports advocates like Lynn who speak out against cluster bombs and argue for a universal ban on the weapon.

Since 2006, Handicap International donors have supported the clearance of 2.4 million square meters of land in Laos and the destruction of 17,000 bombs. There’s still a long way to go, but I’m hopeful that donors and advocates like Lynn, myself, and you can finally bring the people of Laos the peace that they deserve.

Join Us.

Handicap International’s website has the most up-to-date news, plus photos and videos of the people your donations help.

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We’d love to hear from you.
reachout@handicap-international.us

DONOR REFLECTION

Patrick Wheary holds a model A-7 Corsair II, the plane he flew during the Vietnam War.