

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 15
Issue 1 *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action*

Article 3

April 2011

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Recommended Citation

Reed-Matthee, Karen (2011) "AMATC: Sustainable Solutions for Humanitarian Mine Action," *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action* : Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol15/iss1/3>

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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 Khan¹ 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 up a staff, Afghan demining organizations were asked to suggest possible employees. Khan was nominated and became 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 nephews. AMATC has "a very holistic mission," says Roberta Burns, the Kabul-based Foreign Service Officer for the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau



(Left) An AMATC technician welds a piece of equipment despite the loss of his right hand during service as a deminer. (Right) The center's team leader is one of 11 men employed by AMATC since 2008. All photos courtesy of Gehn Fujii/AMATC.

of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), which funds CPI's work with victims of wartime explosives, their families, and their communities in Afghanistan and other mine-affected parts of the world.

Conceived by CPI and its subcontractor, Elegant Design and Solutions, AMATC also generates revenue from product sales to sustain its operation, and to support local physical rehabilitation and treatment facilities such as the Kabul Orthopedic Organization, one of CPI's nine implementing partners in Afghanistan.

"It [is] excellent social entrepreneurship," says Burns. "It [is] exactly what we're looking to do in Afghanistan."

The center currently offers demining hand tools and accessories, counter-IED equipment, and replacement parts for the Bozena 4 demining machine,² as well as training and first-aid kits. Many of the tools are lighter in weight than traditional models while employing more durable and resilient materials, such as Kevlar

hand guards on bayonets that provide greater shrapnel protection. Because the products are locally made, they often cost less than those supplied by foreign sources.

Along with AMATC's humanitarian mission, the center's emphasis on providing top-quality equipment designed to increase safety and comfort over long periods of use for deminers has prompted PM/WRA to recommend its products to other U.S.-funded mine-clearance contractors in Afghanistan. "We're working on an ad campaign on behalf of AMATC," Burns says.

Frequently, design concepts originate from customer input as to what would make a more effective field tool, says AMATC Technical Advisor Gehn Fujii. In some cases, he adds, AMATC will work with clients to design and develop tools to specifically suit their needs, depending on cost and production feasibility.

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 Ehsan. 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," Fujii says. "There's no month-to-month cash flow."



Rodney Robideau from PM/WRA (left) examines tools fabricated by AMATC with center director Ehsan as employees and CPI staff look on.

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," Fujii 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]." ♦

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Married to CPI Co-founder Imbert Matthee, **Karen Reed-Matthee** has been involved on the periphery of the organization since it began and has visited Clear Path programs in Afghanistan and Vietnam. Since May 2010, she has been on staff as Director of Communications, bringing more than 20 years of experience as a writer and editor for large metropolitan newspapers, *National Public Radio* and a number of magazines to Clear Path. She is the co-founder of a Seattle-based magazine devoted to women's health and financial well-being. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of California, Berkeley, and she has a master's degree in journalism from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. She and her husband have a 13-year-old son, Niko.

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