

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE ICRC



### **Ms Zarmina Popalzai**

38, beneficiary of the ICRC orthopaedic programme  
in Afghanistan

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I grew up in the city of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. Although I cannot remember much about my childhood, I remember the day my life changed forever. When I was 12 years old, I went to Kabul with my family to visit our relatives and we spent a week with them. At the end of our visit, we left to return to Kandahar. My father, mother, two brothers, sister-in-law, nephew, and cousin got into our vehicle to start the day-long journey. My father was driving the family car as he usually did.

On the way our vehicle hit a landmine that was planted in the road, and was blown up in a huge explosion. I cannot recall what happened afterwards because I was knocked unconscious. I later learned that my nephew and I were the only survivors. My father, mother, two brothers, and sister-in-law were all killed at the scene. I was later informed that some good Samaritans rushed my nephew and me to the hospital in Zabul where we received emergency medical assistance. The accident happened 200 kms from Zabul. Later, I was transferred by helicopter to the hospital in Kabul that was supported by the ICRC.

Only one month and numerous surgical interventions after the incident did I regain consciousness. My older sister was the first person to come and visit me in hospital. She lived in Kabul with her family so she could come everyday to see me. When I asked her where our mother and father were, she told me that they 'were gone', and I cried and can still remember the sadness and despair that engulfed me.

During my stay at the hospital, the doctors worked to treat my injuries, especially my legs, which were both bandaged. My right leg got worse and eventually had to be amputated below the knee. Without my right leg I felt 'incomplete' and feared for my future – not sure how I could continue with my life. My sister and her

family reassured and encouraged me. I stayed at the ICRC hospital for three months, and when I was discharged I moved to live with my sister and her family.

While I was living with my sister I could not go to school because I was not able to move independently. I stayed home to help the family with daily chores. My sister's husband made a pair of wooden crutches for me so that I could move around. I used those crutches for six years. Then one day my brother-in-law came with the news that someone had informed him that the ICRC could assist me to walk again. My brother-in-law took me to the ICRC's orthopaedic centre in Kabul. The staff there were friendly and encouraging. They reassured me that my life would become better. A month later I returned to the centre and I was fitted with a prosthetic leg and received physiotherapy for fifteen days. After that, I could walk on my own and felt independent and that I could do anything I wanted. Thanks to the ICRC, I was able to receive the fittings in Kabul.

Although I still do not know who evacuated me to the hospital in Kabul after the incident when I was just a child, I am grateful to the ICRC for restoring my health and giving me the possibility of walking again. Today I am married to a man who lost his leg after a mine accident when he was in the army. We have ten children – nine daughters and a son. They are aged between three and nineteen years. The ICRC has helped me to recover from a terrible loss in my life, and to become a wife and a mother. Now that I can lead a normal life, I hope to get employment in order to support my family. Our household could benefit from additional income because my husband and son do not earn enough to adequately meet the needs of the family. It would be nice if the ICRC could consider providing some employment.