



# LAND MINES

## a love story

**PG**

Parental guidance recommended  
for persons under 15 years.  
Mature Themes.

a film by **Dennis O'Rourke**

(director of CUNNAMULLA, THE GOOD WOMAN OF BANGKOK and "CANNIBAL TOURS")

a CAMERAWORK PTY LTD production - financed by FILM FINANCE CORPORATION AUSTRALIA LIMITED  
produced in association with the AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION and CHANNEL FOUR TELEVISION  
distributed in Australia and New Zealand by RONIN FILMS

CAMERAWORK

ffc australia  
Film Finance Corporation

RONIN  
FILMS

[www.landmines-a-love-story.com](http://www.landmines-a-love-story.com)

[www.roninfilms.com.au](http://www.roninfilms.com.au)

# **LAND MINES**

**a love story**

**RUNNING TIME: 73 minutes**

**RATING: PG (Mature Themes)**

**Available in DVD/VIDEO formats only**

**FOR ALL PUBLICITY ENQUIRIES**

## **TRACEY MAIR PUBLICITY**

50 Bay Vista Lane  
Ewingsdale NSW 2481  
Phone: 0419 221 493  
Email: [traceym@tmpublicity.com](mailto:traceym@tmpublicity.com)

**FOR ALL DISTRIBUTION & SALE ENQUIRIES IN AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND**

## **RONIN FILMS**

PO Box 1005, Civic Square ACT 2608  
Phone: 02-6248 0851  
Fax: 02-6249 1640  
Email: [andrew.pike@roninfilms.com.au](mailto:andrew.pike@roninfilms.com.au)

VISIT THE OFFICIAL LAND MINES WEBSITE:

**[www.landmines-a-love-story.com](http://www.landmines-a-love-story.com)**

# LAND MINES

## a love story

### ONE LINE DESCRIPTION

A film about Afghanistan, land mines, survival and love.

### ONE PARAGRAPH DESCRIPTION

In the ruined city of Kabul, during the time of Taliban rule, a former Mujaheddin soldier noticed a pretty Tajik girl with one leg and began to court her. This was the beginning of an unlikely love story. Part essay and part observational film, this is an anti-war film set in a country that has become synonymous with warfare.

### SHORT DESCRIPTION

**LAND MINES – A LOVE STORY**, with compelling naturalness, tells the story of Habiba and Shah who, because of the wars fought in Afghanistan over the past 25 years, have experienced immense suffering, but who have survived to show how it is possible to be brave and moral in this world of sanctioned violence and official lies.

Shah, a former Mujaheddin soldier and land mine victim, works as a cobbler on the pavements of the ruined city of Kabul. One day, he noticed a pretty Tajik girl who had only one leg, and he began to court her. Amidst the chaos and violence, and despite all the obstacles of tradition and religion, Shah and Habiba were able to marry.

Part observational film and part essay – driven by a polemic that is both angry and subtle – **LAND MINES – A LOVE STORY** is an anti-war film set in the country whose name has become synonymous with conflict. It is also a story of romance and a celebration of life, hope and love.

# LAND MINES

## a love story

### ONE PAGE DESCRIPTION

**LAND MINES – A LOVE STORY** is the latest film from Dennis O'Rourke (**Half Life**, **"Cannibal Tours"**, **The Good Woman of Bangkok**, **Cunnamulla**). With compelling naturalness, the film tells the story of Habiba and Shah who, because of the wars fought in their country, Afghanistan, over the past 25 years, have experienced immense suffering, but who have survived to show how it is possible to be brave and moral in this world of sanctioned violence and official lies.

In 1979, at the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan; they were resisted by Mujaheddin soldiers, armed and financed by the United States. Ten years later Russia was defeated and withdrew from a devastated country. Warfare between rival Afghan factions continued until the Taliban controlled most of the country. Afghanistan soon became a base for Al-Qaida.

Habiba was herding the family cow near her village when she stepped on a Russian-made land mine. At the age of eleven, she was wounded in the most violent way imaginable. This was in 1992, and in another part of the Shomali valley, Shah, a former Mujaheddin soldier, was recovering from his war wounds. Shah thought that, because of his disability, he would never have the chance to marry and raise a family.

Soon, war raged again in the Shomali valley. The Taliban attacked and destroyed Habiba's house and farm. Most of her family fled to the refugee camps in Pakistan but because of her injuries Habiba had to remain in Kabul which soon came under Taliban control. Living close by in the poorest part of the city, Shah noticed a pretty Tajik girl who had only one leg. Amidst the chaos and violence, and despite all the obstacles of tradition and religion, he began to court her.

Flash forward to early 2002. The Taliban have been routed and Afghanistan occupied by the United States and its allies. Kabul and all parts of the country have come under intense bombardment with thousands more innocents killed and wounded. American-made cluster bombs – which have the same killing effect as land mines – litter the country. Habiba is begging on the pavement in the main bazaar. She is just nineteen. Her husband Shah is her only support in the world; he works in the streets as a cobbler. On a good day he can bring home the equivalent of two dollars, which is not enough to feed their family of three children.

Habiba and Shah are illiterate, yet they speak with great eloquence and conviction about how war and conflict have affected their lives. They discuss international events and moral issues from a perspective that is so far removed from our own. Their insights into the state of the world, and their example of how to live, are enough to shame our leaders in the West, and us too.

Part observational film, and part essay – driven by a polemic that is both angry and subtle – **LAND MINES – A LOVE STORY** is an anti-war film set in the country whose name has become synonymous with conflict. It is also a story of romance, a celebration of life, hope and love in the ruined city of Kabul.

# LAND MINES

## a love story

### DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

It was in the year 2000. I had just completed **Cunnamulla** – a film set in my home country of Australia, which was, in the view of some, controversial (if not abominable) because it revealed truths that many would prefer hidden away. Next, I wanted to make a film away from Australia, a film which was personal – about people from another culture and place whom I could love, and who could relate to me – but in my mind this film also had to be about a global issue of pressing importance.

On the long flight to London, in the middle of the endless night, I dreamt up a title. A day later at the offices of Channel Four Television, my colleague, Peter Dale, the Head of the Documentary Department, asked me, “What are you doing next?”

I replied, “I am going to make a film with the title of Land Mines – A Love Story.” He said he liked the idea. We went to the pub and made a plan; now, all I had to do was find the story. I came home and went about raising the rest of the money while I researched the issue of land mines.

In search of the story, I travelled to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam – all places where land mines are a scourge. I was about to go to Angola and Mozambique – two of the most heavily mined countries – when the US invaded Afghanistan, routed the Taliban, and made it possible for me to film there.

I arrived in Kabul in early 2001. I knew no one in this chaotic city, I was alone, a bit frightened and, in this Muslim country, I was wishing for a drink. I had all my cameras and equipment with me and I was there to make a film of a certain kind – with a specific title.

The next day, as I was being driven to the Central Bazaar, my mind racing, I glimpsed a shiny plastic leg protruding from the blue folds of a burqa – a woman sitting on the pavement and begging. Against all the rules of custom and sanity, I decided that I wanted to know her.

And that is how this film came about.

To explain my film making process is a bit like a cat chasing its tail. In any case, I confess that how I actually make my films is a complete mystery to me. I can sit with you, looking at a film with my name on it but I certainly will not think its author is exactly the same person who is watching that film.

The act of creating a documentary film is one of synthesis upon synthesis. Each stage of the film making process — from imagining, through recording, and through all the stages of editing — becomes the modifier of previous stages, in both direct and mysterious ways. Also, for it to work, the filming process must be an ordeal of contact with reality. I must place myself within the perceived reality of what I am attempting to film in order to discover the authenticity of people and places, and to fix my emotional perspective within a social and political process — one that is not academic. I believe that documentary films must not exist outside of the reality that they attempt to depict.

The title made the film and the film made the title. The magic of the documentary film is that one can start to create with no idea of the direction of the narrative and concentrate all thinking on the present moment and thing. It is important, when you make a film, not to be rational but instead to trust your emotions and your intuition. Because, when you try to be rational the true meaning and the beauty of any idea will escape you. I believe the story is much less important than the ideas and the emotions that surround it.

I started with only an attention-getting title. In Kabul, I was privileged to meet Habiba, Shah and their children. I was welcomed into an extraordinary world – a world normally hidden from outsiders. No matter what my failures in telling this story have been, *something happened*. I can't explain what – it still seems miraculous. Habiba decided to shed her veil (not only in a literal sense) and engage with me and with my camera. Habiba and Shah, poor and illiterate peasants who have lived all their lives in the shadow of warfare and who never had the opportunity to go to school, could express to me (and to those who would later see my film) some of the most eloquent depictions of the problems in this world that we all share.

***Dennis O'Rourke, April 2005***

# LAND MINES

## a love story

### FACT SHEET

Land mines, in their original, crude form, were first used during the American Civil War. Since then they have been used in almost all conflicts, large and small. On average, every 20 or so minutes, a civilian in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Chechnya, Mozambique, Angola, Bosnia, El Salvador, Sri Lanka or elsewhere is killed or injured by a land mine.

The wars of the latter part of the twentieth century have left 100 million or more mines hidden in the fields, forests, roads, railways, water supplies, towns and houses of the poor. This remains a rough estimate since few accurate records were kept when mines were deployed. Rebuilding war torn communities and economies are extremely difficult in these conditions. In many communities, recovery, reconciliation and long-term development are all but impossible due to the prevalence of land mines.

These weapons have been deployed in over sixty countries; and they have to be cleared – primarily by hand. Men and women, using metal detectors and/or dogs, prod the earth with wire and sticks – working over the land, inch by inch, clearing 30 – perhaps only 10 – square metres per day. A well trained mine clearer can, statistically, deactivate nearly two thousand land mines before he or she is likely to be killed or maimed.

Anti-personnel mines are designed to maim rather than kill, as deaths are, for an army, less costly. Pressure-activated blast mines predominantly injure the legs and genitals. Directional, bounding and stake mines can blast fragments into any part of the body. Plastic mines are particularly difficult to deal with.

At present, mines, which cost from US \$3 to US \$25 each to deploy, cost from US \$300 to US \$1,000 each to uncover and deactivate. With the total number of active mines rising by more than a million per year, the aggregate cost of destroying them is rising by up to almost US \$2 billion per year.

Although over 100 million mines have been stockpiled and 1,200 organisations worldwide are involved in anti-land mine campaigns, the production of land mines continues. The arms manufacturers from those countries that have refused to sign the Land Mine Ban Treaty still surreptitiously provide land mines to conflicts in third world countries; backyard manufacturers copy models produced in the first world, while first world companies continue to refine their product, in order to meet a changing climate of international opinion and regulation.

Of the 16 nations that are still producers, eight are in Asia (Burma, China, India, North Korea, South Korea, Pakistan, Singapore, and Vietnam), three are in Europe (Russia, Turkey, Yugoslavia), three are in the Middle East (Egypt, Iran, Iraq), and two are in the Americas (Cuba, U.S.). There are no longer any producers in Africa.

There are over 344 types of anti-personnel land mines that have been produced by over 100 companies in 52 countries around the world.



In 1997, the historic treaty to ban land mines was signed (the Ottawa Convention). Since then, over one hundred and fifty countries have signed the Mine Ban Treaty, prohibiting the production and use of anti-personnel mines.

Countries that have refused to sign include China, Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, North Korea and South Korea, Pakistan, the Russian Federation and the United States of America.

The same grass-roots effort that helped ban land mines in many countries is now pushing for an intense international review of cluster bombs. Cluster bombs, which are not precision-guided, consist of canisters that break apart to release a large number of small "bomblets." Many bomblets do not explode but lie on the ground much like anti-personnel land mines. U.S. forces used them extensively in Afghanistan, as they did in Kosovo in 1999, during the Gulf War in 1990-1991 and in the latest war in Iraq.

Despite the actions of land mine clearing agencies, land mines still litter 82 countries around the world. There are between 15,000 and 20,000 new land mine victims every year.

(For more information visit: **[www.icbl.org](http://www.icbl.org)**)



# LAND MINES

## a love story

### BIOGRAPHY – DENNIS O'ROURKE, PRODUCER & DIRECTOR

Dennis O'Rourke was born in Brisbane. For most of his childhood he lived in a small country town, where his parents ran a failing business, until he was sent to a Catholic boarding school for his secondary education. In the late 1960s, after two years of fruitless university studies, he went travelling in outback Australia, the Pacific Islands and South East Asia. During this period he worked as a farm hand, salesman, cowboy, a roughneck on oil rigs, and as a maritime seaman. He also taught himself photography and dreamt of becoming a photojournalist. Wanting to make documentary films, he moved to Sydney where the Australian Broadcasting Corporation employed him as an assistant gardener. He later became a cinematographer for that organisation.

From 1974 until 1979 he lived in Papua New Guinea, which was in the process of decolonisation. He worked for the newly independent government, teaching documentary filmmaking skills to Papua New Guineans. His first film, YUMI YET – INDEPENDENCE FOR PAPUA NEW GUINEA, was completed in 1976, and it was widely acclaimed.

His other films include **Ileksen – Politics In Papua New Guinea** (1978), **Yap... How Did You Know We'd Like TV?** (1980), **The Shark Callers Of Kontu** (1982), **"...Couldn't Be Fairer"** (1984), **Half Life – A Parable For The Nuclear Age** (1985), **"Cannibal Tours"** (1988), **The Good Woman of Bangkok** (1991), **Cunnamulla** (2000) and **LAND MINES – A LOVE STORY** (2004).

Retrospectives of O'Rourke's work have been held at the Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival, the Berlin Film Festival, the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, the Pacific Film Archive in San Francisco; and in other cities, including Freiburg, Honolulu, Los Angeles, Marseille, Melbourne, New Delhi, New York, Singapore, Taipei, and Uppsala.

In 2005, Dennis O'Rourke received the Don Dunstan Award for his contribution to the Australian film industry. His many other awards include the Eastman Kodak award for Cinematography, the Australian Film Institute Byron Kennedy Award, the Director's Prize for Extraordinary Achievement at the Sundance Film Festival, the Grand Prix at the Nyon Documentary Film Festival, the Jury Prize for Best Film at the Berlin Film Festival, the Grand Premio at the Festival de Popoli in Florence, the Film Critics' Circle of Australia Award for best Documentary, the Australian Film Institute Best Director Award (for **Cunnamulla**) and the Australian Centenary Medal "for services to Australian society and Australian film production".

Dennis O'Rourke is the father of five children; he lives in Cairns. Currently, he is producing and directing **"I Love A Sunburnt Country..."**, which is a feature film on the subject of being Australian, as seen through the poetry and poetic imagination of 'ordinary' people.

# **LAND MINES**

a love story

## **CREDIT LIST**

written, produced & directed by

**DENNIS O'ROURKE**

location coordinator

**BEHROZ NASSORY**

film editors

**RUTH CULLEN**

**ANDREA LANG**

consultant producer

**TRACEY SPRING**

photography & sound recording

**DENNIS O'ROURKE**

translations & subtitles

**NASIBA AKRAM**

**WAGMA AZIZA**

**HOMAIRA RAZI**

music licensing

**CHRISTINE WOODRUFF**

"VERKLAERTE NACHT" op. 4 Sextet by Arnold Schoenberg

published by Richard Birnbach Musikverlag KG

Performed by The Raphael Ensemble

Courtesy Hyperion Records Ltd

archival film research

**ALEXANDER KANDAUROV**

Moscow

**DAVID THAXTON & KEVIN GREEN**

**THAXTON GREEN STUDIOS, INC.**

Washington

archival film sources

**ABC TELEVISION**

**AFGHAN FILM – KABUL**

**ALEXANDER KANDAUROV**

**ARIANA FILM – KABUL**

**ITN – LONDON**

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE**

**U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES**

sound editor & sound mixer

**MICHAEL GISSING**

**DIGITAL CITY STUDIOS**

colour grader  
**AL HANSEN**  
**FRAME, SET & MATCH**

online editor  
**DAVID TINDALE**  
**FRAME, SET & MATCH**

post production advisor  
**JEFF McDONALD**  
**MAGNET POST**

advisors  
**NASIBA AKRAM**  
**MARTHA ANSARA**  
**PATRICIA GARCIA**  
**SALLY REGAN**

accountant  
**ANTHONY NICHOLLS**

publicist  
**TRACEY MAIR**

legal advisors  
**BRIAN HATCH**  
**TOM MOLOMBY SC**  
**SHANE SIMPSON**

insurance brokers  
**H. W. WOOD AUSTRALIA PTY LTD**

completion guarantor  
**FIRST AUSTRALIAN COMPLETION**  
**BOND COMPANY PTY LTD**

acknowledgements  
AFGHAN FILM  
**Siddiqullah Barmak**  
**Mohammed Afzul Baryally**  
**Janil Sarwar**

THE HALO TRUST  
**Dr Farid Homayoun**  
**Dr Nasir Ahmad**  
**Rahamadtullah**  
**Tom Dibb**

ICRC HOSPITAL, KABUL  
**Dr Alberto Cairo & staff**  
**Najmuddin, Rohatza,**  
**Arzu & Sima**

THE MINES ADVISORY GROUP  
**Sean Sutton**  
**Tim Carstairs**  
**Archie Law**  
**Brad Bradley**  
**David Tinning**  
**Pheap Mono**

OMAR  
**Fazel Karim Fazel & Staff**  
**Mr Enyatullah**  
**The Female Mine Awareness Teachers**  
**Sharifullah Ibrahimi**

UN MINE ACTION PROGRAM  
FOR AFGHANISTAN

**Tammy Hall**  
**Dan Kelly**

AND

**Mitchell Block**  
**Augustus Dulgaro**  
**Asif Farooqi**  
**Rob Fisher**  
**Jenny Fuller**  
**Andrew Gallimore**  
**Tony Gibbs**  
**Dr Haida**  
**Frank Haines**  
**Wendy Hallam**  
**Hayatullah Haytek**  
**Catriona Hughes**  
**Jussef Jannisar**  
**Danielle Kelly**  
**Maggie Loescher**  
**Amy Lucas**

**Michelle McDonald**  
**Kerrie McGovan**  
**Glenda McKechnie**  
**John Mifsud**  
**Stefan Moore**  
**Mr Nader**  
**Kenzo Nonami**  
**Bill O'Rourke**  
**Celia O'Rourke**  
**Davy O'Rourke**  
**Tim Page**  
**Anna Proulx**  
**Emily Renshaw-Smith**  
**Jan Rofekamp**  
**Umberto Rondi**  
**Sarah Royds**  
**Xavier & Sophie**

**Amin Saikal**  
**Mahmoud Saikal**  
**Omar Samad**  
**Susan Scheer**  
**Katie Speight**  
**Lisa Scott**  
**Jeff Thurman**  
**Barbara Truyen**  
**Ilana Tzur**  
**Kaye Warren**  
**Robyn Watts**  
**Capt. J D Webster**  
**Sakiko Yamagami**  
**Hassan Zaidi**  
**Susan MacKinnon**  
**Diane Weyermann**

with unending gratitude to  
**Habiba, Shah, their children and Mairy**

PRODUCED WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE  
**AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION**  
executive producer for the ABC – Dasha Ross

PRODUCED IN ASSOCIATION WITH  
**CHANNEL 4**  
commissioning editor – Peter Dale

THIS FILM WAS SUPPORTED BY A GRANT FROM THE  
**SUNDANCE DOCUMENTARY FUND**

PRODUCTION COMPANY  
**CAMERAWORK PTY LIMITED**  
[www.cameraworklimited.com](http://www.cameraworklimited.com)

FINANCED WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF  
**FFC AUSTRALIA**  
**FILM FINANCE CORPORATION**

### **PRESS STORY**

#### ***Afghan Mine Clearers Risk Life, Limb***

*By Laura King, AP*

Even in the December chill, a thin film of sweat glistened on Mohammed Naseem's forehead. At the foot of a crumbling mud wall, in what was once a pretty village where clusters of grapes hung heavy on the vine, his metal detector had just uttered a small, telltale shriek.

Naseem, an Afghan mine-clearer with five years' experience, knew it might well be a false alarm. Already on that bright cold morning, he had uncovered several buried shell casings from Kalashnikov assault rifles, a bit of scrap metal, and what looked to be the digging edge of a rusty spade abandoned by a farmer in the days when people cultivated fruit and raised children in this place.

Now Ali Khuja, a village on the mountain-ringed Shomali plain north of the Afghan capital, Kabul, is yielding up a more sinister harvest - dozens, perhaps hundreds of land mines laid by northern alliance troops for whom this was a front-line position during years of struggle against the Taliban.

As yet another war winds down, Afghanistan - already one of the world's most heavily mined countries - is confronting a grim new variant on an old scourge.

In dozens of towns and villages, mine-clearers like Naseem are racing to find and destroy mines and unexploded ordnance before refugees begin streaming home.

For some, it is already too late. Last week, a few miles up the road from this hamlet, a teen-age refugee ignored warnings and tried to slip into his former home, hoping to salvage a few belongings. Almost at his doorstep, he stepped on a land mine.

An Associated Press Television News crew working nearby shot footage of the boy howling in pain as his mangled leg hung by bloody shreds of skin. The mine-clearers' medical team, always standing by when its crews are at work, rushed him to a Kabul hospital. The leg could not be saved.

Kneeling now, Naseem slid a thin metal rod into the dirt - and heard the telltale tock-tock-tock as his probe lightly tapped the side of a disc-shaped anti-personnel mine.

With almost diabolical precision, it was planted at just the spot a person intending to clamber over the low wall would have used as a foothold.

Scarcely breathing, Naseem used a small scraper to expose an inch or two of the mine's curving, dull-black side, studded with small spikes. He could see at a glance that it was an Iranian-made YM-1, and had he triggered it, his leg would have been blown off to the knee.

Afghanistan has a small army of mine-clearers - about 4,500 of them, most employed by half a dozen U.N.-affiliated agencies whose funding is supplemented by private groups and foreign governments.

For this dangerous work, most make about \$105 a month - a princely sum in a country where the average monthly wage is \$4. Most readily admit the high salary is the main attraction, but all say they also take satisfaction in rendering their war-wrecked country a bit more habitable, day by day.

Mine-clearing work throughout Afghanistan was suspended Oct. 7, when the United States began bombing Taliban targets and training camps of Osama bin Laden (news - web sites)'s al-Qaida network. Here on the Shomali plain, the de-mining resumed Nov. 14 - the day after the Taliban fled Kabul.

In Ali Khuja, the mine-clearers are lucky - the local northern alliance commander left a map, though an imprecise one, of the mines his men had laid throughout the abandoned village to fortify their defenses.

When the Taliban took Kabul in 1996, they drove out the mainly ethnic Tajik inhabitants of Shomali villages like this one. Northern alliance troops then fought their way in, and the area became the forwardmost of the alliance's front-line positions outside the capital.

It will probably take 18 months to make the village safe, said Nasir Ahmad of the Halo Trust, the agency contracted to clear it. Even then, villagers will have to confine their movements to homes and yards, marked footpaths, cleared fields and the banks of irrigation canals.

Invariably, more lives will be lost as people forage for firewood or try to reclaim derelict orchards and vineyards, Ahmad said. About 3,000 Afghans are maimed each year by land mines or unexploded ordnance, according to the Red Cross.

A short while after finding his Iranian-made mine, Naseem stood a hundred yards away, mopping his forehead with his tattered headscarf as he waited for fellow workers to attach a long fuse and blow up the mine in a controlled explosion.

When he heard the percussive blast and saw the dust plume rise into the deep-blue sky, Naseem, a 31-year-old father of 10 children, closed his eyes for a moment.

"Once again, God has protected me," he murmured. Then he pulled down his protective visor, took up his tools and went back to his patch of earth.

### PRESS STORY

#### ***Afghan Team Makes Artificial Limbs***

*By Mort Rosenblum, AP*

In Alberto Cairo's little workshop, teams of Afghans bustle around with skill and enthusiasm, each of them intent on the job of repairing people.

And then Cairo himself, a bespectacled Italian ex-lawyer with the soul of a standup comedian, tries to ensure that every finished product gets a fresh start on life.

Cairo, 48, runs Ortho Project for the International Committee of the Red Cross, a full-service orthopedics program which replaces limbs lost to land mines or polio and also provides physical therapy for paraplegics.

A quarter century of war has cost at least 40,000 people a limb, and millions of mines strewn across Afghanistan injure 3,000 more each year. Just making enough artificial legs and arms is a gargantuan task.

But, for Cairo, that is only the starting point.

"You can't let them go away without doing something more," he said. "We work on the physical aspect but also on social rehabilitation, to find ways to help people get back into society."

As a start, he practices what he calls total job discrimination. About 80 percent of his 275 Afghan helpers are physically handicapped. The number is not higher simply because he won't replace able-bodied workers hired long ago.

For many patients, he arranges interest-free loans of \$100, which in Afghanistan is enough to start a simple business. He also prevails upon government and voluntary agencies to hire the handicapped.

Cairo's infectious humour and predawn-to-dark work schedule fire his workshop with enthusiasm. He tries to stay in the background - to the point of typing his name without capital letters - but to no avail. Italian newspapers call him the "Angel of Kabul," a sobriquet that once made him cringe in embarrassment, but now makes him chuckle.

"He is like my father, a very, very good man, and I would do anything for him," said Sayed Musa, 32, who works for Cairo as a physical therapist. "If Mr. Alberto hadn't come, I would have lost my life."

That was no idle remark. Musa is Hazara, an ethnic minority often at bitter odds with the majority Pashtuns who made up the Taliban. He was not only crippled but also targeted for death when Cairo took him in.

Cairo's deputy, who uses the single name of Najmuddin, lost both legs to explosions but now hurries about the compound on made-in-Kabul artificial limbs. Najmuddin is known for being capable and committed to his job; Cairo can't recall a single day when he missed work, no matter what firepower was raining on Kabul.



Ortho Project runs six centres in Afghanistan, including the main workshop in Kabul, on a yearly budget of only \$2 million.

Since 1988, four years before Cairo took over, the project has registered 26,000 amputees and 24,000 other disabled people. It has made 40,000 artificial limbs, 77,500 pairs of crutches and 6,400 wheelchairs.

During the first ten months of 2001, the mostly Afghan staff conducted 65,000 physical therapy sessions. Home care teams visit paraplegics who cannot make it to the centre.

Cairo insists on manufacturing limbs and components in Kabul rather than importing them from Switzerland as Red Cross officials advised. They cost a fraction as much, he said, and they foster local pride.

His persuasive manner and track record persuaded the Red Cross to bend its rules. Normally, for instance, people move periodically from one project to another to keep them fresh. Not Cairo.

Strict guidelines define what Red Cross delegates and project managers can say in public. Cairo simply speaks his mind, adding praise for an employer he frankly admires, but also gilding no lilies.

He is fiercely devoted to his people. When all other international aid workers evacuated Afghanistan in September, Cairo also left, kicking and screaming.

He returned 57 days later to find that his Afghan team had not missed a day of work. The banks of flowers in his greenhouse and garden had been watered. His cat, Rita, had been spoiled rotten.

Cairo, from a village in Italy's Piedmont region, was a lawyer in Milan until he decided to do something else with his life. He studied physical therapy and worked as a volunteer in the perilous region of southern Sudan.

But Afghanistan fascinated him. He found a job here with the Red Cross, arriving in 1992 just as four years of vicious factional fighting began to rage in Kabul, and he stayed.

Cairo starts work each morning at 4:30 a.m., sticking carefully to his self-imposed schedule. "Sometimes I wake at 4 a.m., and I'm unhappy that I have to wait another half hour to get started," Cairo said.

"It's true, I've done some good here," he concluded. "But I have to be honest. With all the lessons I've learned, the people I've worked with, I'm the winner."

## PRESS STORY

### **Afghanistan's Hidden Killers**

*By Marcus George, BBC News*

The ambulance had stopped in the middle of the road and in front of it men crouched over a young boy.

The boy let out a whimper which was barely audible. But he lapsed into unconsciousness as medical staff tended to his wounds.

### **CHILDREN ROUTINELY IGNORE WARNINGS**

This boy is yet another statistic on a list of landmine victims. Minutes earlier the teenager had been foraging in the scrub collecting firewood on a sunny Monday morning.

But he had taken one step too far. A landmine had blown off his left foot and caused severe damage to his right leg.

Around him the asphalt road was red with blood and, while doctors applied emergency treatment, many doubted his chance of survival.

I met up with Dr Nasir, deputy programme manager for the Britain's Halo Trust mine-clearing agency, to look at some of their activities at one location in the heavily mined Shomali Plain region.

### **LANDMINES IN AFGHANISTAN**

Cost of one mine: \$3-\$30

Cost of clearing one mine: \$300-\$1,000

Cost of clearing Afghanistan's mines: \$500m

686,813 devices (mines and unexploded bombs) destroyed so far

But the cruel ways of war were only too apparent as this farming boy lay in motionless agony.

The anguish on Dr Nasir's face showed he could never get used to the tragedy inflicted by landmines.

"They know there are mines here. There are signs and we tell them all the time," he said angrily.

"But that doesn't stop them. They say they must go to these mined areas and that God will look after them."

### **SHOMALI PLAIN**

We moved up the road to visit another site where a 28-year-old mine-clearer had just uncovered an Iranian anti-personnel mine in the middle of a path.

Mohammad Atiq was deftly uncovering the little green plastic box at the end of a narrow path 200 metres long which was hemmed in by the mines on both sides.

### **STONES PAINTED CRIMSON RED SHOW THE WAY TO SAFETY**

The mine-clearing was quicker in this patch, I was told, because they had found the soldier who laid the mines in the first place and he had given them the information.

Having hosted front line after front line, the Shomali Plain is now one of the most mined areas in Afghanistan.

Stones painted crimson red mark the edge of a minefield and sit just under a metre apart on every road in the region.

Up until two weeks ago anti-tank mines, packed with 200kg of explosive, were buried in the asphalt.

### **MINE-CLEARERS KILLED**

The Halo Trust now has 500 mine-clearers concentrated in the region working all hours of the day to free the land, metre by metre, of mines and other explosives.

### **MANY MINE-CLEARERS ARE FORMER SAPPERS**

But tragedy struck the charity just this week when two mine-clearers were killed trying to clear an area from highly volatile cluster bombs. A third faces an amputation in the coming days.

"This is a shock to our organisation," Dr Nasir said. "These two men were young and one of them had just become a father.

"But we are doing this to save the lives of others and our work must continue."

On the way back to Kabul, Dr Nasir castigated Afghan warlords for continuing the fighting in Afghanistan.

[Warlords] have left huge areas infected and this is the cause of death to civilians. But they don't care that people are dying because of them

### **DR NASIR, FROM THE HALO TRUST**

"They must stop this war and should not fight over control. If they want to continue their fight they should use only Kalashnikovs and stop laying mines.

"They have left huge areas infected and this is the cause of death to civilians. But they don't care that people are dying because of them. People are dying because of this."

### **DEALING WITH VICTIMS**

In the centre of Kabul, the International Red Cross Orthopaedic Centre deals with the legacy of landmine victims.

Since it was established in 1988, the centre has registered more than 26,000 amputees and assisted them with prosthetic limbs and social rehabilitation.

The humanitarian organisation estimates that mines injure approximately eight people every day and this figure does not include people who are killed outright.

### **MINE-CLEARING METHODS**

Manual clearance by trained personnel using metal detectors and long thin prodders to locate the mines  
Mine-detection dogs, which can smell the presence of explosives  
Mechanical clearance using machinery such as rollers and excavators to destroy mines in the ground

At the back of the hospital, scores of amputees test their new prostheses over steps and uneven terrain to prepare them for a new way of life.

But the centre also provides home teachers for paraplegic patients and runs a disabled job centre to help patients return to a semblance of normal life.

Head of the centre Alberto Cairo showed me 300 job applications that had been sent to him.

Jobs cannot be found for all of them, he told me. But a new "micro-credit" system has also been set up.

Under this, former patients are lent \$100 for viable projects which is paid back in instalments. And more than 80% of the money returns, he emphasised.

After 12 years of unstinting work, Alberto has built the centre into one of Kabul's most important medical institutions.

"I will probably stay here forever," he said.

"The people give me the energy to stay. So as long as I can be useful I will continue my work. Now I think of Kabul as my home."

*Copyright © 2001 British Broadcasting Corporation. All rights reserved.*