



PRESS RELEASE

HQ 4th Armoured Brigade
Basrah International Airport
Op TELIC 5



4TH ARMD BDE

Telephone: 07801 095506 or 07801 095572

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British Army Puts Best Foot Forward in Iraq



Plastic Fantastic: Proud technicians at Basrah Prosthetics Centre show off their handiwork

Tucked behind the city's General Hospital, in an area strewn with refuse and open sewage, Basrah Prosthetics Limbs Centre is testament to the hope that exists in the southern Iraqi provincial capital. The health centre is in one of the many run-down parts of Basrah, yet it offers future prospects to victims of road traffic accidents and mines and, increasingly, those with serious bullet wounds.

A recent delivery of prosthetic materials is part of the British Army's wider effort to improve health care across southern Iraq. Whilst Multinational Forces are engaged in more conventional military operations north of Basrah, the relationship that the British have with the community in the south of the country has allowed the troops to take on the responsibility for targeting Treasury money on reconstruction projects. As part of that undertaking, a British TA officer has personally delivered essential supplies to the health centre, escorted from the Kuwaiti border, which will enable it to produce 'custom-made' limbs in their on-site workshop.

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Though much progress has been made on the re-construction of the region since the war, years of neglect by the previous regime have left the Basrah Prosthetics Limbs Centre woefully under resourced. Like much of the health service in southern Iraq, able individuals staff it, although they lack sufficient training and have to work with inadequate supplies.

On the latest delivery of equipment the Director of the centre, Dr Kamal Yaqoub, says: "The material the British Army brought is a modern type of prostheses that my technician used to work with before the war. Chemical materials only work when you have the complete components and this will help a lot in the future."

Established before the recent conflict, the centre in the city's Hay Al Kafa'at District aims to provide assessment, treatment and lower limb prosthetics to all of southern Iraq. They treat accident victims, disabled people, amputees including mine victims, and patients with cerebral palsy, polio and rheumatic conditions, as well as providing physiotherapy to post-operative patients. Forty percent of the patients are children.

The Basrah centre is a progressive and forward thinking facility, and its director has a vision to arrange workshops and physio classes in three other southern Iraqi provinces. This would reduce the need for patients to travel into Basrah, which is both costly and dangerous in the current climate. British and other international organisations are discussing assistance to this vision.

Dr Kamal takes a personal interest in sports injuries and speaks fluent English. He proudly unveils his ideas: "We want to expand our technical workshop and plan to address our shortage of medical staff by training more locals. We need to train staff to do upper limb prosthesis because of the need to travel to Baghdad, which is very difficult because of security."

Captain Abbirose Adey is the twenty-four year old Territorial Army officer who personally organised for the prosthetics supplies to be escorted from their delivery point in Kuwait. A member of 36 Signals Regiment in Cambridge, she is currently serving with 4th Armoured Brigade. She originally volunteered to direct the Army's efforts for the health sector in Basrah Province, and landed the role because of her background in Sports Science.

Delivering essential supplies is only part of her job, as Captain Adey says: "We are mostly monitoring the Health Directorate, but there are some things that they have no control over, such as the looting of drugs from convoys. We are trying to bring the Iraqi health sector up to a level where they can cope for themselves once we've left."

The stability that already exists is largely due to the joint efforts of the Multinational Forces, the UK Department for International Development (DfID), and non-governmental organisations such as Save the Children. "DfID doesn't usually deal with health, but arranged for a Health Advisor, Jane Wilshaw, to stay on after the Coalition Provisional Authority handed over control to the Iraqis. Jane has provided continuity and a corporate knowledge that has been invaluable," explains Abbirose. "Our relationship with DfID is mainly liaison to ensure we don't do the same things. They can't get about as easily as us, so we have become their eyes on the ground."

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Dr Kamal spells out the problem from his own perspective: "Until now we have had no problems with materials. Our workers have not been trained well because they have no foreign experience. Now they need more experience and training in how to use modern technology and make proper prosthetics."

According to Abbirose: "It's the basic things that they haven't got. The staff are well qualified and motivated, but the buildings lack hygiene. It's terrible in the hospitals and there's lots of rubbish around the hospital sites."

As part of the plans to reduce infectious diseases, the British Army and the Health Directorate in Basrah have identified the rehabilitation of its hospital laundries as a priority. "The next big thing is hygiene and cleanliness. It's about capacity building", explains Abbirose.

"There's been a definite improvement; they have a strategic plan and they're thinking along the right lines, they just need guidance and money. Sovereignty over these issues now resides with the Iraqis and they are beginning to make the decisions about their own future," she continues. "This Centre shows the hard work and dedication that is here in Basrah, and this exemplary facility should be a model to others".

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