



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-Building Capacity in Iraq One Life at a Time-

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Baghdad - In the Intensive Recovery Unit (ICU) of a Coalition Forces hospital in the International Zone, Mahmoud Hassan al-Hadi slowly lowered himself to a chair and handed his crutches to Dan Bisbee, a member of Baghdad's Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). Though clearly exhausted, Mahmoud was equally determined to thank the people around him for saving his life.

Three months earlier he had come through these very doors, unconscious, bleeding heavily, and close to death. Though still frail, the thick scar running up one leg testified to only a portion of his wounds.

Mahmoud's smile was infectious. The people gathered around him were the same who had worked desperately to save him.

Cradling the crutches Bisbee stood close to Mahmoud and his aunt, Shatha al-Obedie. Dan has served in Baghdad since 2005. He first came to Iraq as a soldier then stayed on as a member of a State Department Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) working to build the capacity of the Iraqi system to serve the nation and its people "The Iraqis I met cared so much about their country. I felt a responsibility to help, to use what I had learned," he said.

In the course of his work Bisbee often spoke with Shatha al-Obedie, the Press Secretary for Baghdad's Governor Hussein al-Tahan. Al-Obedie was one of the first women chosen to serve as a local council member in Baghdad in 2003. She is now one of the highest-ranking women in Baghdad's Provincial Government and, at least in Bisbee's mind, an Iraqi hero. While not surprised to hear from Shatha on February 1, 2008 he was unprepared for her message.

That Friday had started normally for the hundreds of shoppers thronging the Rusafa pet market in eastern Baghdad. As on every Friday morning couples, families and children strolled the stalls buying and selling. Many others just took delight in viewing each vendor's collection, the market having longed served as an impromptu zoo due to the exotic nature of some the animals.

Mahmoud, whose mother and father were traveling in Jordan, was spending time with his Aunt Shatha, shopping the surrounding markets. Shortly before 11 AM, Mahmoud and his aunt separated and he entered the pet market to look at the birds. Seconds later the first bomb went off.



Left to Right: Shatha al-Obedie;
Mahmoud Hassan al-Hadi;
Daniel Bisbee, Policy Chief, Baghdad PRT.

The explosions that morning became notorious in the coming days. The attackers had used mentally-ill women to carry suicide vests into the crowded market, making it one of the most heinous acts yet witnessed in Iraq.

Mahmoud was severely injured by shrapnel; his torso was torn open, his right leg shattered. He was taken to a trauma facility at the Medical City compound in downtown Baghdad. The facility was overwhelmed by the catastrophe. In the circumstances, the doctors told Shatha that Mahmoud could well die from his wounds; at the very least, his leg would have to be amputated.

That's when Bisbee got the call. He and Captain John Downing (then the PRT's Operations Chief and since returned to Iraq as a civilian contractor) immediately went to work. Coordinating with the US Ambassador's office and US military leadership, they arranged for Mahmoud to be transferred to the International Zone where he was operated on. His leg was saved, and his severe intestinal injuries repaired. After several days of recovery, Mahmoud was released to an Iraqi hospital where he recuperated.

Three months later Mahmoud is still painfully thin. He will not regain full use of his leg for months. Yet he was in high spirits to be able to thank his benefactors. From the doctors who performed the surgery, to the translation staff that assisted his mother through many anxious nights, and to the members of the PRT and U.S. Embassy who arranged his treatment, Mahmoud was profuse in his gratitude.

As Mahmoud handed the medical team gifts he had brought along, a doctor spoke for her fellow medics "It's just so good to be able to see him. We rarely get to see someone after we work on them, to see how they are doing and if it made a difference".

It certainly did for Mahmoud. In the midst of the smiles and soft laughter a tear slid down his cheek. "What you have done for me, the gift you have given me. They said I would lose my leg. That I would die. I am alive because of you" he said in Arabic. Then in broken English, as he was leaving "You Americans, you are gift".