

Artificial limbs give hope to Boko Haram amputees

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Njidda Maidugu breaks into a broad smile as he wobbles on his artificial leg with the support of crutches as a nurse walks alongside, helping him to keep his balance.

Maidugu, 35, never thought he would walk on two legs again after he lost his right limb in a Boko Haram suicide bomb attack at a checkpoint in Maiduguri, northeast Nigeria, in 2016.

"It feels like a miracle to walk with two legs again, I'm happy," the fuel station attendant told AFP at the National Orthopaedic Hospital in the northern city of Kano.

"These are my first steps on two legs in two years and I feel like a toddler learning to walk," he added, looking down at his new plastic leg outside a prosthetics workshop.

Maidugu was one of about 130 people who lost limbs in Boko Haram attacks and have been fitted with free artificial replacements in a project run by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The ICRC set up the limb-fitting workshop at the hospital in August 2016 to provide prosthetics to amputees from the three northeastern states worst hit by the Islamist insurgency.

The jihadist violence, now in its ninth year, has killed at least 20,000 people and left thousands of others with life-changing injuries.

"Half of the 262 patients we have fitted with prosthetics are (Boko Haram) war victims," said the head of the project, Jacques Forget.

"The primary focus of the project is to cater for amputees from the conflict, women and children."

Bombs and bullets

The Boko Haram conflict has destroyed the livelihoods of millions of people in a region that was already desperately poor even before the violence began.

Most of the population in northeast Nigeria live on less than \$2 a day. That makes prosthetic limbs—which cost on average nearly \$700 (585 euros) - prohibitively expensive.

As well as those injured by the bombs and bullets of Boko Haram, other beneficiaries include diabetics, victims of car crashes and industrial accidents.

Babagana Habu, for example, hopped around with the help of a stick for 13 years after losing a leg in an accident with a grinding machine, until he heard about the project.

"My parents were too poor to get me crutches to walk with," said the 25-year-old recharge card vendor, from Damaturu, the capital of Yobe state.

Most of the cases from the Islamist insurgency have been wounded by gunshots or improvised explosive devices, said Forget.

"Not many mines are used in the conflict, unlike in many conflict areas I have worked in," said Forget who has worked on artificial limbs for

almost 50 years.

Amputees are first assessed in the Borno state capital, Maiduguri, where the ICRC runs a medical clinic that caters specifically for victims of Boko Haram attacks.

The clinic complements services provided by a handful of state-run hospitals in the city which has been overstretched by the sharp rise in emergency cases from the jihadist violence.

The conflict has seen an exodus of doctors and other health service personnel from Maiduguri, leaving a huge gap that other medical charities are working to fill.

The University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital (UMTH), which treats the bulk of trauma patients, has only one consultant orthopaedic surgeon.

Once potential beneficiaries of artificial limbs are screened, they are then sent for a fitting in Kano, nearly 600 kilometres (375 miles) away.

Huge demand

Forget works on an average of five amputees a week, which is just a fraction of the number of those seeking his services.

"There is a massive number of people who need limbs and we would be flooded if we opened our doors to everyone of them," he said, surveying the stump from Maidugu's atrophied thigh.

Maidugu heard about the free prosthetics project from a friend who convinced him to try his "luck" despite initial doubts.

With five staff, the workshop struggles to meet deadlines to allow

patients to return home within a week.

"It is a huge problem compounded by the conflict," said Forget.

Despite setting up another limb workshop at Ahmadu Bello University Teaching Hospital, in the town of Shika, in neighbouring Kaduna state, the demand keeps increasing.

The ICRC plans to open a similar workshop in Maiduguri with construction work expected to start this year in its effort to meet the huge prosthetic demand.

"We are trying to give them a sense of normality, we give them a little quality of life," said Forget.

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