

PRESS NEWS 2014



Special Talent Exchange Program (STEP)

THE PAIN OF BEING DISABLED IN PAKISTAN

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Anser Abbas lost both his arms, and 21 relatives, in a suicide attack at a hospital six-years ago [Al Jazeera]

Anser Abbas is a full-time journalist in Islamabad, having left his hometown of Dera Ismail Khan in northern Pakistan to earn a better livelihood - and escape the suicide attacks.

As the Pakistani government mulls over peace talks with the Taliban, the cry, and need, for peace continues to get louder and more emphatic. No one values peace more than Abbas - he lost both arms, and 21 of his relatives, in a suicide attack six-years ago.

Abbas is just one of 18 million handicapped or disabled people in Pakistan, according to the UN, but unlike the majority of those, he doesn't want charity or sympathy.

“I feel normal. What's happened has happened and nothing can be done about that. I knew that if I had given up lying in a pool of blood, I wouldn't have been able to survive.”

Anser Abbas, suicide attack victim

"I've never let a single negative thought enter my head, even when I was lying on the ground, my left arm a few metres away from me, and I could see my family and friends dying in front of me," Abbas told Al Jazeera.

"I feel normal. What's happened has happened and nothing can be done about that. I knew that if I had given up lying in a pool of blood, I wouldn't have been able to survive. I follow that same principle now - optimism and trust in God is what is taking me forward."

Family targeted

Abbas had arrived at the hospital - where the suicide attack took place - to cover a story on targeted killings while working as a journalist. It was only later that he discovered the target this time was his relatives.

After one family member was attacked and taken to the hospital, his relatives gathered there to check on the victim. That's when the Taliban struck again at the medical facility - a common tactic in the war for the enforcement of a strict interpretation of Islamic law throughout Pakistan.

The majority of the 35 casualties were known to Abbas - cousins, uncles, childhood friends - and as they were buried side by side, the family was left shattered. Living in a country that looks down on disabled individuals, Abbas decided not to let his handicap meddle with his aims and dreams. He spent a few months on the hospital bed and became tired of doing the same at home, so even without his arms and hands he decided to use the computer and continue where he left off.

"I had a master's degree in journalism and mass communications. I was working as a journalist before the blast, so sitting idle and not writing became very frustrating. So I got a computer installed near the bed. My artificial arms didn't function well so I couldn't type. But then I realised I still had toes that worked, so I started using the keyboard with my feet."

Abbas is one of the few handicapped Pakistanis who don't let their disability stop them in their tracks, according to Atif Sheikh, president at Special Talent Exchange Program (STEP), an organisation that trains disabled individuals on how to adjust.

"Companies and businesses in Pakistan do not consider them a productive human resource," said Sheikh. "They discourage you and we need to influence them by producing effective role models. They don't accept the disability and treat those individuals as unwanted," he said.

"You need to change people's attitude as well. You need to train teachers in those schools on how to handle children with disability. You then need to teach the other kids how to behave. If a disabled kid is being made fun of, why would he bother with anything?"

Atif Sheikh, Special Talent Exchange Program

Change of attitude

Sheikh blamed a lack of effective planning at the school level for the behaviour, arguing that unless educational institutes were disability friendly, there is no hope. And the awareness should not stop at creating wheelchair ramps and toilets designed for the disabled.

"You need to change people's attitude as well," Sheikh said. "You need to train teachers in those schools on how to handle children with disability. You then need to teach the other kids how to behave. If a disabled kid is being made fun of, why would he bother with anything? It is only after that you move on to interpreters, sign-language instructors, Braille and transport with disable access."

The acceptance is very gradual, added Sheikh, but the training given by STEP - with CV writing, computer courses and leadership skills - is the need of the day. The media, he added, needs to take the first step.

"You see dozens of political talk shows on TV every day, but has anyone thought of inviting an expert in a wheelchair, or getting a partially sighted person on the panel? When people with disability realise that society is accepting them, they may come out of their houses and live their lives normally."

Abbas, too, is keen on helping and volunteers for an NGO to help people with disabilities, while also working on several projects pushing for peace in Pakistan.

Other than the tens-of-thousands wounded, more than 1,560 civilians have been killed in attacks, most claimed by the Pakistani Taliban, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan , or its allies, since it was formed in 2007.

"You can't impose peace, you just need to promote it," Abbas said.

Source:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/02/pain-being-disabled-pakistan-2014249751959749.html>

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