

## Afghanistan: Sandali stoves, a blessing and a curse

23-01-2009 Feature

**In Afghanistan the Sandali stove is a popular, cheap heating method. But its use is also fraught with danger, such as asphyxiation or accidental burning. The ICRC's Jessica Barry explains.**

---

It was a mild, bright day after a freezing night. The narrow lanes that led past the mud walled houses that lie clamped to the hillsides above one of Kabul's busy markets, were slippery with half-melted ice and sewage. It is mostly poor people who live in this crumbling neighbourhood, and Raz Mohammad, a physiotherapist from the orthopaedic centre run by the ICRC was on his way to see a patient paralysed for years following a spinal chord injury.

The man's father, Mubarak Shah, was waiting on the doorstep to receive his visitor. He led the way to a small, inner room where his 38-year-old son, Sardar, was lying propped up against cushions. Behind him was a window whose panes were covered in plastic sheeting instead of glass. The room was dark, shaded with red curtains, and warmed by a traditional 'sandali' coal fire.

Sandalis offer a cheap alternative to the more sophisticated wood-burning stoves, called bukharis, that poor families may own, but few can afford to use because of high fuel prices. The blessing of a sandali is that the whole family can sit around it to keep warm, their legs tucked under the blankets that cover the rectangular wooden frame that is placed over the brazier to keep the heat in.

But sandalis have their dangers, too. The coal fumes cause breathing problems for young and old; children who snuggle up too close under the blankets can get asphyxiated; paraplegics like Sardar must take care not to burn themselves if their nerve-shattered limbs get too close to the heat, for they can feel no pain.

### **Sardar's story**

Some nights earlier, Sardar had gone to sleep by the sandali as usual. When he woke up in the morning he noticed a strange smell.

"I saw my sock was burnt through," he explained to Raz Mohammed who was unwinding a makeshift bandage covering Sardar's right foot, to reveal toes and flesh that were black and charred.

After cleaning the wound with iodine Raz Mohammad told his patient to come to the orthopaedic centre. "You must have an x-ray," he explained. "The doctor will decide whether you need to go to hospital."

Sardar gazed at his burnt toes, holding his matchstick-thin leg up to the light. He neither flinched, nor wept. He listened to the instructions about how to bandage his foot properly, smiled at his mother, Saberoo, who was sitting on the other side of the sandali, her dark eyes brimming, and then leaned back against the cushions to talk about other things.

"I was hit by shrapnel when our house on the Shamali plain was destroyed by a rocket, years ago," he began. "One of my brothers was killed, and I survived."

"But I was left paralysed."

"We couldn't stay there after our house had been destroyed," said Saberoo, (60), taking over the story. "We had no land or trees, and there was no money to rebuild the house, so we moved to Kabul."

The family pays the equivalent of 100 US dollars a month for their decrepit, rented rooms overlooking the bazaar, an exorbitant sum. "But the good thing is, it is close to the market," Saberoo remarked, "so it is a little easier for my sons to find work."

It has been an advantage for Sardar too. Instead of lying at home when his brothers went out, they would take him with them, carrying him down the slippery, narrow lanes to the main road each morning. Parked in the dirt amidst the fruit trolleys was a small green kiosk. The family bought it with seed money from a micro-credit scheme which the orthopaedic centre runs. They stocked it with biscuits, milk and other groceries, and it was there that Sardar spent his days selling his wares and chatting with customers. It not only helped to bring in a little money, it also gave him the sense of independence that is so vital to a disabled person's wellbeing.

Decades of war and political turmoil in Afghanistan mean that life is a struggle for all but a few. The orthopaedic centre's 600 or so paraplegics face extraordinary difficulties. Nearly all of them are extremely poor, and many are destitute. They survive on the rations of rice, beans, flour, tea and clarified butter, or ghee, that each patient receives quarterly from the ICRC along with their treatment and home visits.

This winter many of the worst off will also receive firewood for their bukharis, thus providing them with an alternative source of heating to the lethal sandalis. To date, around half of the centre's 600 paraplegics have benefited, thanks in part to the generosity of individuals and well wishers who have donated money.

When he had finished dressing Sardar's wound, Raz Mohammed – who is himself disabled, having lost an arm to a landmine as a teenager – took Mubarak Shah off to the timber sellers' market to buy a'kharwar' of firewood – about 560 kgs for the family's bukhari. The gift came too late to save Sardar's foot, but will mean that for the rest of this winter he and his mother can go to sleep at night without fear of waking up to a tragedy in the morning.

