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**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# Blind Iraqi girl Shams Kareem finds new hope in London

Readers' donations have enabled an Iraqi girl blinded by a bomb to come to Britain for treatment

*Hala Jaber*

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Occasionally, something good comes from the carnage and misery of war. Yesterday, at Heathrow airport, a kind of miracle occurred when a three-year-old girl, blind, burnt and disfigured by a terrorist bomb, arrived on a flight from the Middle East for specialist medical treatment in London that her family never believed she would receive.

Surgeons at Moorfields eye hospital hope they may find it possible to restore some of her sight. They are reserving final judgment until they have carried out tests starting tomorrow.

Thanks to the remarkable generosity of Sunday Times readers who donated more than £127,000 after reading her tragic story in the paper eight weeks ago, the first essential step has been taken: Shams Kareem has left the grimness of Iraq behind to be the recipient of some of the finest medical treatment available for blind people in the world.

It was in Baghdad, on a sunny day in November 2006, that the life of this baby girl was shattered by a car bomb.

Shams - her name means "sun" in Arabic - and her family were returning home in their car when they were caught up in one of Al-Qaeda's deadliest attacks, near a Baghdad market: 202 people were killed and hundreds more injured as a series of bombs, coordinated to cause maximum bloodshed, ripped through streets crowded with shoppers.

Shams's mother Wafa, who was cradling her in the back of the car was engulfed in flames and died at the scene. Her father, Hisham Kareem, 32, found his daughter lying face down on burning asphalt, her head covered in blood.

After three months in hospital Shams returned home. Her left eye was destroyed and there was no sign that she could detect any light in her right eye. Her face, too, was terribly disfigured - injuries Hisham knew meant his daughter would grow up in a world of prejudice. Iraq is a country with few facilities for severely disabled children and its culture tends to stigmatise the handicapped, denying them education, career or marriage.

His appeals for help unanswered by the Iraqi government, Hisham has campaigned, prayed and hoped that his "blind angel" would have a chance to be treated in Europe. At last, Sunday Times readers' donations have made it possible. Shams is about to receive some of the world's most advanced

treatment, physical and psychological, for blind people.

The fact that she has been able to leave Iraq and come to Britain has overwhelmed Hisham. He said: "God sent this newspaper and this country's people to get her here. He is able also, we hope, together with the great doctor, to give her sight back."

While Shams does not seem to remember the attack itself, she appears to have been psychologically scarred by it, covering her ears when she hears a loud bang. She is a frightened little girl who refuses to walk alone and demands to be carried, mainly by her great-aunt Sattoota.

Within hours of touching down at Heathrow yesterday she and her father and Sattoota were visiting some of the most familiar tourist sights of London, including the Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens.

Of course, Shams could not see the sights. But at St James's Palace she met Lance-Corporal Alan Smith, 23, of the Grenadier Guards who had served six months in Iraq. "She is a very special little girl. I wish her all the best," he said as she touched his bearskin and planted a kiss on his cheek.

Mingling in the sunshine with tourists in Parliament Square, Shams took off her shoes and walked barefoot on a patch of English grass, feeling it under her feet for the first time.

On her journey here she had already begun to taste some of the little joys denied her in Iraq as the family waited in Beirut for British visas. She sat with her father and Sattoota on the rocks of Beirut's Corniche promenade, her face caressed by the sun, gurgling happily by the seaside.

In Baghdad, the little girl had never seen the sea. Perhaps she now never will. Even so, her ears were straining to hear the waves smacking against the rocks. She shrieked as her finger touched the water and played with pebbles on the seashore.

Hisham and Sattoota laughed at her joy. They shed tears, too, knowing that she may never see a wave crash on the seashore.

Sattoota, a frail 66-year-old woman to whom Shams, in her dark world, turns constantly for love and reassurance, described the day she found the baby girl in hospital two years ago.

"Her eyes were damaged, her face burnt, she had tubes inside her including one for breathing, I did not recognise her until the hospital staff brought me her belongings and I identified her clothes and the earrings she was wearing," she said.

"Even her little tongue had been cut in various places and the doctors had to sew it back together."

She now feeds, bathes and attends to Shams's every need. "She has suffered enough, it breaks my heart that she cannot see and I would go to the end of the world for her to get better," said Sattoota.

At Moorfields, Yassir Abou-Rayyah, an eye specialist, has waived his fees for Shams's treatment. "If we can restore her sight that would be fantastic, but if not we aim to improve her cosmetically by making her look normal to be able to face the community," he said.

Shams will first undergo surgery to reconstruct her eyelids. Depending on whether sight to her right eye can be restored she will also have to go through corneal surgery and be fitted with one or two prosthetic eyes. The operations will be carried out in two stages, six months to one year apart.

"No place in the world will give her more than here," said Abou-Rayyah. Shams will undergo plastic surgery in Great Ormond Street children's hospital. Here, too, Jonathan Britto, a consultant plastic surgeon, has waived his fees.

In addition, both the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and the Royal London Society for the Blind (RLSB) have offered to provide specialist help for Shams's father and great aunt to teach them activities that will develop her senses and help her to relate to the world. Elizabeth Clery, RNIB's head of children's services, said such training was crucial.

The little girl has been invited to sessions at Dorton House nursery in Kent, run by the RLSB, where she can play in sensory rooms with toys that vibrate or make noise. She can walk in a garden with plants chosen for scent and texture.

Donations have poured in from more than 1,000 Sunday Times readers. A teacher of the visually impaired at Craigiebarns primary school in Dundee read the girl's story to her class, prompting pupils to send donations and messages of support.

"I am blind as well," wrote Stefan Stevenson, a five-year-old blinded by cancer in the eyes. "I don't need to pay for my operations and I go to school to learn. When I heard your story I felt a bit sad so I am sending some of my money. Good luck."

Another blind pupil, Zoe, wrote: "I felt terrible when my teacher read your story. I wish you luck and get better soon."

One mother sent in a contribution on behalf of her eight-month-old daughter, Lara. "I hope the little angel regains some sight and her family and she can regain some faith in humankind. No little girl should ever go through such horrors," she wrote.

A girl from Sutton Coldfield, Abi, sent in a picture she had drawn of herself and Shams, with a cheque for £5. The note attached said: "Here is some money from my piggy bank to help with your operation. Hope you are feeling a lot better soon. Love from Abi (age 6)."

Such generosity knows no national boundaries. In Beirut, Shams's story and endearing character also caught the heart of everyone who met her.

An old man who owns a children's clothing shop sent her a bagful of new garments for her trip to London; mothers sent bags of fresh fruit, homemade cakes, a new pair of boots to replace Shams's old ones and prayers of goodwill.

Shams, who still does not speak in sentences, did the only thing she knew to show her appreciation. Sensing their care and sincerity she approached each individual and once identifying their gender she called them auntie or uncle, stood in front of them and raised her arms, asking to be carried.

When people did, she wrapped her arms around them, nuzzled her face and head in their neck and uttered "hayati", meaning "my life", an endearment used in Arabic to express care and love.

Our thanks to all those who helped to bring Shams to Britain, including Middle East Airlines, Flying Carpet Airlines, Mövenpick Hotels and the British embassy in Beirut.

### **Caring words**

More than 1,300 readers of The Sunday Times have responded to the story of Shams Kareem with donations or messages of support and sympathy

"I am blind as well. I had cancer in my eyes. I don't need to pay for my operations and I go to school to learn. When I heard your story I felt a bit sad so I am sending some of my money. Good luck." **Stefan Stevenson, 5, writing in Braille**

"This is my week's pocket money. Love to Shams." **Bethany, 9**

"I have a child of a similar age and I can't imagine what this child and her family have endured and how they can contemplate the future." **Angela Cummings, Kent**

"The world has proved to be such a horrible place for this poor little girl - will human beings ever stop fighting?" **A reader from Somerset**

0 comments

 **James Smith**

1 person listening

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