



**Frontlines:** Osh Memories

**MSF Volunteer:** Aftab Ahmad, MD

**Mission:** Kyrgyzstan

*Last June riots erupted in Osh, in southern Kyrgyzstan, killing at least 400 people and injuring thousands more. MSF teams provided medical care and assistance to many of the injured.*

*xxxxxxxxxxxx helped one young man who escaped death by leaping from a sixth floor window*

During my mission in Osh, I was called to see a victim of last year's violence. Accompanied by a translator and carrying a heavy MSF backpack I climbed to the sixth floor of an old Russian building. The door, which led to a small, dark flat with two rooms, was opened by an elderly lady, and just a step away was a young, fragile man lying on a bed. He was her son, who had married the previous year, and was a paraplegic with no control over bowel or bladder. He was emaciated and depressed. His mother, a widow, also looked ill and I found that she was asthmatic and hypertensive. Living in the tiny rooms with the trio was another lady with her two small children.

During violence last June, their door was broken down in the middle of the night by five or six men who tied up the three ladies. Then they caught the young man and their leader took out a knife with the obvious intention of slaughtering him. Luckily at that moment the gang leader's mobile telephone rang, and, taking advantage of the distraction, the young man jumped out of the window. The assailants left the flat, leaving the young man unconscious on the road below. He was taken to hospital where he remained for more than a month with multiple vertebral fractures and paraplegia. When he was discharged, he was advised to go for follow-up checks at regular intervals.

However, since then the family has been fighting callous and biased health officials. In view of their precarious financial condition and the location of the flat, the family wanted the young man to be kept in hospital, but their request was turned down under the pretext that the hospital was overcrowded.

The first day that I visited the family, I gave them materials and training for the treatment of bed sores and the care of bladder and bowels. MSF handed over non-food items to the family. Subsequently I made a few more visits to the family for treatment, training and counselling of both the mother and her son.

On the day before I was due to leave Osh, I was informed that the family wanted to say farewell to me and I was pleasantly surprised to see the transformation. Apart from the young man looking happy and healthy, the whole family seemed to be upbeat and optimistic.

The old lady told me that she had been able to penetrate the walls of hatred, prejudice and complacency by following my suggestion to treat Kyrgyz doctors just like her sons. She had been inspired particularly when I narrated the story of a friend who lost his father to the frenzied mobs during the partition of India in 1947 – when he was still in the womb. He was brought up by his mother, who was a pillar of strength, but she died a few years ago and, just a few months later, his only son succumbed to cancer at the age of 18. Now this friend has no mother and no son, and then had nobody to drive him to hospital when he suffered a heart attack. He asked me what his crime was to deserve this. This family realised that their son is still alive, with a mother, and his wife is pregnant. So, they have a lot to live and hope for.

The lady has been able to get her son registered as an invalid, entitling the family to financial help from the local government. In addition, after initial rebukes and ridicule, the doctors have become very friendly and sympathetic, seeing her perseverance and mother-like attitude.

*Aftab Ahmad, MD  
MSF volunteer*