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The Frontier Post

US troops suffer more catastrophic injuries

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Grim combat statistics show U.S. troops in Afghanistan suffered an unprecedented number of catastrophic injuries last year, including a tripling of amputations of more than one limb. A study by doctors at the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, where most wounded troops are sent before returning to the U.S., confirmed the fears: The battlefield has become increasingly brutal. In 2009, 75 service members brought to Landstuhl had limbs amputated. Of those, 21 had lost more than one limb. But in 2010, 171, 11% of all the casualties brought to Landstuhl, had undergone amputations, a much higher proportion than in past wars. Of the 171, 65 had lost more than one limb. Injuries to the genital area were also on the increase. In 2009, 52 casualties were brought to Landstuhl with battlefield injuries to their genitals or urinary tract. In 2010, that number was 142. Dr. John Holcomb, a retired Army colonel with extensive combat-medicine experience, said he and other doctors involved in the study were shocked by the findings, which he labeled as "unbelievable." "Everybody was taken aback by the frequency of these injuries: the double amputations, the injuries to the penis and testicles," said Holcomb, now a medical professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston. "Nothing like this has been seen before." Military brass say the increase in catastrophic injuries can be attributed to the Taliban's use of improvised explosive devices, the roadside bombs that account for the majority of U.S. and NATO deaths and injuries. Last year was also the deadliest year for U.S. troops in Afghanistan, with 499 killed, according to the Defense Department. Troops are increasingly vulnerable to injuries from such makeshift bombs as they mount foot patrols in an effort to win support from Afghan villagers, a key strategy in the counterinsurgency campaign. An armored Humvee provides a measure of protection from a blast. A so-called mine-resistant vehicle provides more. But when a soldier or Marine steps on a roadside bomb, there is considerably less protection from flying shrapnel or super-heated air. Also, rocks, dirt and other debris embedded in a blast wound can cause immediate and devastating infections. The hospital

at Landstuhl is the busiest it has been since the battle in the Iraqi city of Fallouja in late 2004, officials said. Both the number and severity of wounds have increased, said Air Force Lt. Col. Raymond Fang, a surgeon and trauma medical director at Landstuhl. The average patient stays about three days at Landstuhl before being airlifted to the U.S. for further care. "All we're doing is clearing up the destruction done by the injury," Fang said. In Afghanistan, some officers believe the insurgents have increased both the explosive power of their improvised bombs and their ability to place them for maximum carnage.