

The bigger picture

The young girl locked in a piercing scream in Massoud Hossaini's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph has shone a powerful light on Afghanistan's internal conflict, reports **Lynne O'Donnell**, in the second of a two-part series. Portrait by **Farzana Wahidy**.



Massoud Hossaini's Pulitzer Prize winning photograph shows Tarana Akbari, 12, after a suicide bomber attacked the crowded Abul Fazl mosque in Kabul during Ashura festivities. Among the dead at her feet is her seven-year-old brother, Shoalb.



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ulitzer Prize-winning war photographer Massoud Hossaini can't quite bring himself to feel happy about being in Paris, even as he strolls along light-filled boulevards and sits by a pond in the Jardin des Tuileries, squinting in the watery spring sunshine while watching children float wooden boats from one side to the other.

Hossaini is from Kabul, Afghanistan. On the day he arrived in Paris, May 2, his home city was yet again under siege. Taliban suicide bombers and gunmen had attacked a fortified compound housing foreigners and killed eight people, two of whom were children who had been walking to their high school next door.

The children are collateral damage in this war, now in its 11th year. Most of the people killed since 2001 have been Afghan civilians, and though no one can know exactly how many, it's safe to put the figure in the tens of thousands.

"I'm really happy to be in beautiful Paris, but I know there's fighting and explosions in Kabul," Hossaini says as we stride beneath a rain-heavy sky along the Boulevard Saint-Germain. We are looking for a secluded garden cafe where, we have heard, Michelle Obama took her two daughters for afternoon tea while accompanying her husband, United States President Barack Obama, on a state visit to France in 2009. When we find it, the garden is closed.

"This is the mixed feeling for Afghans – we never feel complete happiness," Hossaini says. "Whenever we feel we have happiness in our lives, it is balanced or ruined with a feeling that is really bad. I've come to Paris and yet I hear that there's fighting and bombs in Kabul. How should I feel?"

"I am happy to be in Paris, but I'm really sad about something that is happening to my city. And possibly to people I know. People are scared, people die every day."

The photojournalist has been covering the war in Afghanistan, as a stringer for Agence France-Presse, since 2007. In that time, he has covered innumerable violent attacks in the capital, running towards the bombs and bullets to bring back pictures of broken bodies that tell the story of a broken country.

I was Hossaini's bureau chief in Kabul in 2009-10, when the violence in the city was at a peak. We'd be in the bureau by eight o'clock every morning as most attacks happened around that time. Hossaini and colleague Shah Marai, and the drivers, would dash out of the door as soon as we heard a bomb – sometimes so close that the windows shattered. The first thing they would do when they got back from covering a suicide attack was to scrape the blood, flesh and bone of the victims off the soles of their boots.

Hossaini won his Pulitzer Prize for a photograph he took in December, while covering a religious ceremony at a mosque in a southern district of Kabul. The picture also won him first prize in the still photography section of the US National Press Photographers Association awards and second prize in the World Press Photo competition. The first Afghan to win such recognition, he picked up his Pulitzer in New York on May 21.

The accolades elevate Hossaini into the ranks of Vietnam war photographers Nick Ut, Eddie Adams, Hugh van Es and recently deceased Horst Faas. The images these men captured are seared onto the collective consciousness: Ut's of a naked girl fleeing a napalm attack; Adams' of a suspected Viet Cong about to have his brains blown out; van Es' of crowds clamouring to board a helicopter on the roof of the American embassy in Saigon. Faas, mentor to Ut and Adams at the Associated Press, won two Pulitzers, his first in 1965 for Vietnam war combat photography; the second he shared in 1972 for coverage of brutality in Bangladesh.

Hossaini's winning photograph shows a girl wearing a shiny, green satin tunic with matching headscarf and white trousers, standing in bright sunshine, screaming. Her arms are stiff by her sides and her hands are splayed, palms facing out over the gore around her. At her feet are the bodies of a dozen people: women, children and babies. Among them is her brother. Her face and clothes are spattered with fresh blood.

The scene is shocking, sickening, terrifying. The girl's anguish is almost audible. The picture is so immediate it feels intrusive. At the same time as being utterly reviled by what we see, we want to reach out and calm the hysterical child. But it's too late. The worst has already happened; there is nothing we can do. We cannot save her from the horror.

The true power of the picture is beyond that horror; it is in how impotent it makes us feel. And how lucky; that that's not my child; not our country; not our life.

The photograph shows the aftermath of a suicide bomb attack at the Abul Fazl mosque, on December 6. Insurgents detonated bombs simultaneously in three cities – Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif and Kandahar – killing more than 80 people and injuring close to 200. It was the festival of Ashura, when Shia Muslims mourn the death of Imam Hussain, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, who was assassinated in 680AD as he prayed.

Shia mourning is a spectacle in itself, vividly marked by street processions of bare-chested men who whip themselves with chains and knives until they bleed. (Hossaini wears a plastic raincoat when he photographs the Shia processions, to protect his clothes from the blood.) On Ashura, Shia children like to wear green to show their sympathy with Imam Hussain's children, who were also >>

killed in the attack on their father more than 1,300 years ago.

Ashura last year fell on a clear and sunny early winter day in Kabul. The government declared a public holiday so that processions could go ahead unimpeded by the usually gridlocked traffic. Security was also a consideration, though Afghanistan had until then largely escaped sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni Muslims.

A Shia, Hossaini has been at Abul Fazl every Ashura since he returned to Kabul from Iran, where he grew up, in 2002. His family fled to Mashhad as refugees when he was just six months old, to escape the Afghan war with the Soviet Union. Then there was civil war, followed by five years of Taliban rule, so they stayed in Iran until a year after the US-led invasion that toppled the Islamist regime.

In Mashhad, the family carried identity cards issued by the United Nations, which enabled Massoud and his siblings to attend Iranian schools. They were among a fortunate

Reza was scouting for a location to set up a school with his brother, Manoocher. Hossaini asked if he could show Reza some of his photographs, and later that year was among the first intake at Aina, the Deghati brothers' non-profit organisation teaching media and communications skills to young Afghans. It was at Aina, which means "mirror" in Persian, that Hossaini met Farzana Wahidy, now his wife.

"That was the main change to my life," Hossaini says of the two-year course. After they graduated from Aina, Wahidy went to work at AFP until 2006, when Associated Press offered her more money and better hours. Hossaini took her place and since then has covered everything from sport to earthquakes, concerts to combat. "Maybe more than 80 per cent of what I have covered is bad news," he says.

It is a mark of the war in Afghanistan that the Taliban, which claims to be fighting the US-led foreign forces on behalf of the Afghan people, kill many more civilians than they do soldiers. Washington and its allies in Nato are

to use the title "Sayid", but he prefers not to set himself apart from others, he says, and is uncomfortable that some people who know of his heritage are deferential.

His maternal grandfather was imam at Abul Fazl and in the middle of last century lobbied Afghanistan's last king, Zahir Shah, to allow the Shia to publicly mark Ashura, which was banned in the predominantly Sunni country. The king agreed and the mosque has since been the centre of Shia worship in Kabul.

As we stroll around central Paris with Wahidy, Hossaini talks easily about his family's connection to Abul Fazl, about his habit of going there each Ashura and the events of December 6. It is one thing going to the site of a bomb attack, he says, when the damage has been done and you know there will be bodies and body parts to photograph. It is quite another to be there when it happens, suddenly and unexpectedly. It is clear he is still haunted by the experience.

"Every year for the past 10 years I have covered Ashura at Abul Fazl, this is a normal thing for me to do in Kabul and so I did not expect anything would happen," he says.

Antagonism between Sunni and Shia in Afghanistan is usually confined to the western part of the country, bordering Shia Iran.

"During the Taliban time [1996-2001], the Taliban asked the Shia to stay inside the mosques, not to go on the street, but even the [Sunni] Taliban didn't stop [the Shia parades].

"So that's why I never thought that something could or would happen in Kabul. I was just there to cover Ashura celebrations. It is a religious event; you just go, take some pictures. If you have the video, then you also record some voice when they are whipping themselves with chains and singing. That sort of stuff."

The crowd at Abul Fazl had been building for hours by the time the attacker struck, in the early afternoon; the atmosphere had been jolly as families streamed up the hill to the front gate, wearing new clothes, calling out greetings and waving to friends, milling about to gossip and chat. Other journalists were there, Afghan and foreign, though many embassy and charity staff were confined to their compounds.

"When the bomb went off, my back was to the explosion. Suddenly I realised that something really powerful hit me from behind," says Hossaini, referring to the shockwave from the blast. These waves alone can cause fatal internal injuries, explaining why some bodies at the scene of explosions appear unscathed. "I fell to the ground and blacked out, and when I could concentrate again I had some pain inside because of the pressure wave. Then I realised my left hand was bleeding, though it didn't hurt. I just stood up and decided to start working, and start recording."

Powerful explosions, such as that at Abul Fazl, are invariably followed by half a minute or so of silence. Then dogs start to bark, car alarms go off, sirens wail and pandemonium takes over. People who can pick themselves up start to run, in case there is a second bomb or gunmen coming in behind the suicide bomber. When this panic takes over, often people with guns, including police, will shoot at anything that moves.

Hossaini picked himself up and as the smoke cleared, "I saw myself surrounded by dead bodies, on top of each other, all destroy >>



The abandoned, Soviet occupation-era factory of Jangalak, in Kabul, has become home to many impoverished Afghans. Picture by Massoud Hossaini.

minority of Afghan refugees with "official" UN status, he says, as most fell outside that system and lived in abject poverty.

"Afghan refugees lived in a really, really bad situation, with a lot of pain in their lives, and they were so poor sometimes they died of hunger or cold. They were like a forgotten people. It was important for me that I should do something. So I started as a photographer to record this history.

"It was difficult - I couldn't carry the camera openly in Iran because I didn't have permission. And because I was an Afghan refugee I didn't have the right to do that - I could take photos of positive, nice things, like nature. But nothing that showed Iran badly, like Afghan refugees, poor parts of cities. In Iran there are spies everywhere, and religious militia, the Basij, who are in every mosque."

Photography became his passion, he says, and topping his list of heroes was Iranian-French photojournalist Reza Deghati, who is so well known for his work in Afghanistan for *National Geographic* that he goes by one name.

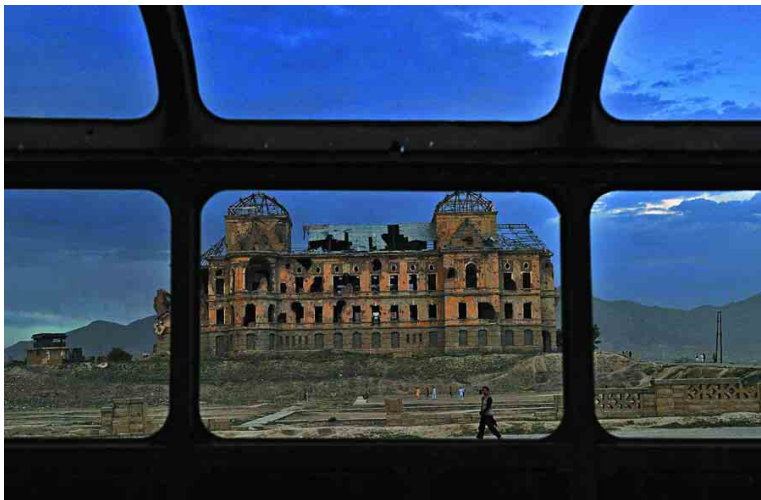
Days after his return from Iran, Hossaini recognised Reza on a Kabul street. That serendipitous meeting changed everything.

committed to withdrawing combat troops by the end of 2014, and are training Afghan forces to take over the country's security, hopefully by the middle of next year.

There is little confidence that they will be able to stand alone for a long time to come. Efforts by President Hamid Karzai, with US backing, to draw the Taliban into peace talks have given rise to fears that the Islamists will soon have a stake in government once more, and that much of the progress of the past 10 years, including basic freedoms, will be reversed so the war can be brought to a close.

"Every day people in Afghanistan die for some reason - IEDs [roadside bombs], the Taliban, landmines that they stand on. Some days they die because they get caught in cross-fire, or are in the wrong place at the wrong time. Gunmen target buildings in Kabul and fight with the police and ordinary people die. A lot of people die from other problems which come from this war, like poverty, lack of security, robbery, sickness - all come from this stupid war," Hossaini says.

Hossaini, 30, is descended on both his mother's and his father's side from the Prophet. That bloodline gives him the right



Above: the ruins of Darul Aman Palace, the former house of King Amanullah (1919-1929), 16 kilometres outside Kabul. **Above right:** a Shia devotee beats himself with chains and blades in a ritual marking Ashura at a mosque in the Afghan capital. Pictures by Massoud Hossaini.

ed, you know, brains coming out of the heads, heads without bodies.

"I have seen this before, but normally that's after the explosion, and I know what I'm doing, and I have expected to see that. But here I didn't expect anything. That scene was shocking for me. I was crying, my body was shaking, I was in tears, I was scared."

As the chaos took hold, Hossaini says, he moved on automatic pilot, taking photos and recording video of the carnage around him. People were running, screaming. Police didn't turn up for about 20 minutes, he says. When there was no second explosion, men ran back into the mosque in a panic, and started beating up anyone still in the courtyard.

"I really didn't think I would stay and record more, but definitely after that my feeling was forcing me to just stay and record. I know a lot of people say to me that it was crazy. A lot of people were saying to me [at the time] that I shouldn't stay there, that I should go."

"But that was the time I should show [in my pictures]. That was my job, my responsibility. I was exactly in the middle of the dead bodies and I was just taking pictures and recording video. I felt I was doing the right thing - I couldn't help [the injured], I was wounded myself, so that was the only thing I could do for those bodies, for those people. It wasn't just about the job, it was my responsibility."

Soon, his left hand began hurting. Macabrely, he thought he had been hit by a fragment of bone from the suicide bomber. Later, he learned it was a ball bearing. Suicide vests are often packed with nails, ball bearings and other missiles to ensure maximum damage.

He drove back to the AFP office and moved his photos on the newswire, sobbing as he did so, from shock, pain, distress. Then he went to his parents' home, where his brother, a doctor, checked his hand, his sister washed his boots and his mother made him tea and hugged him.

Within hours, 12-year-old Tarana Akbari was on the front page of major US newspapers. Hossaini received e-mails from people who had

until then only seen the war as "us versus them", refracted through injuries to soldiers from their own countries.

"I had an e-mail from somebody from New York who said that he never checked the news or papers or anything. But he saw my photo on a newspaper in a shop. He was standing in front of it and crying," Hossaini says.

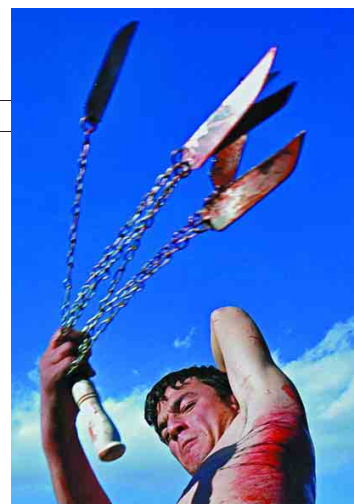
Over the following days, he visited Tarana in hospital, and channelled money and offers of help to her family. He was happy to help but, he says, the pressure from his bosses to keep returning to the family was clearly preventing him from dealing with his own trauma and he refused to go any more.

Tarana recently told an interviewer she still has flashbacks to that moment that "destroyed my family". They lost seven relatives, including her seven-year-old brother, Shoaib. One of her younger sisters has horrible shrapnel scars on her stomach. Tarana walks with a limp but says she is fast getting better and hopes to return to school soon.

Amid Hossaini's joy and pride in winning photojournalism's most prestigious prize has been the inevitable backlash. He has been accused by some interviewers of benefiting from the blood of others, and fears that by becoming famous in Afghanistan he will be the target of death threats, or worse.

"I don't know how to answer these people, who know nothing about Afghanistan but say that I am selling blood. If I didn't show it, how would anyone know what happened? It would be like any other suicide attack in Afghanistan that no one knows about. But this one suicide attack is known about across the world because of this one photo. So I did the right job, and I am proud that I could."

"I've heard a lot of American people say, 'Yes, we know about Afghanistan because our soldiers are dying there.' But this was between Muslims. Nobody else was involved - it was one extremist Sunni group against Shia, a new round of violence, which is really painful. People die because of their beliefs, that's all.



"[The Pulitzer] is good for Afghanistan, for Tarana, for other photographers. It will be good for all journalists working impartially in Afghanistan. I always encourage others in Afghanistan to tell the truth in their work. I am always trying to be impartial, and reflect the truth 100 per cent," he says.

"I will face some problems when I go back to Afghanistan, some threats, and perhaps some other things I don't know about yet. A lot of Afghan TV stations were talking about the Pulitzer and showing my photos. So it means that now a lot of people know me and know my face. Sometimes in Afghanistan, positive fame can be negative for the person themselves, and maybe this will happen to me, too."

The possibility that the Taliban will take a role in a post-war Afghan government combined with his lack of security with AFP - where he is not on staff, has no pension, medical or life insurance and is paid substantially less than the international staff - compounds his concerns. AFP feted Hossaini for bringing the agency its first Pulitzer, but by the time he collected his prize, it had still not reimbursed him the cost of treating the injury he sustained in the Ashura attack.

"I have come to Paris to talk to AFP about this, and they have promised that if I face a threat they will help. But if something happens to me without warning, then there is nothing anyone can do to help me," he says. "This is the reality in Afghanistan."

"Those Afghans who work with the foreigners, but get less salary, I can just say that it's not fair. We do everything, even more than the foreigners, because the foreigners cannot go some places. But we don't have enough money. We always talk about this in Afghanistan, but in some ways we have to accept the situation, because if we don't we will lose the job."

"When the foreigners leave Afghanistan, it will be a difficult life for me. If the worst happens, that I cannot get my camera, and I cannot work in the country, and I cannot write, I cannot talk, I cannot watch movies, for sure I will have to think about things. The Afghan passport is not welcome, so this is a problem. But I just have to work on it and get another passport, and then go to another country."

"But definitely I will cover conflict. I don't want to live in a nice European country and cover nothing. I am good at this, I can show how bad war is. So it's not important which country I go to."

"As long as there is war, I can work." ■