

*The Embattled
Innocence:
Recollections of a
Muslim Relief Worker*

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In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

Preface

8 long years ago, by the grace of Allah¹ (swt²), I bid farewell to Engineering to volunteer in Bosnia. In my travels to war-torn areas since then, I have seen the best and the worst that life has to offer. Where I witnessed war, destruction, death, suffering, captivity, hate and rage, I also saw compassion, love, self-sacrifice, altruism and dedication to Allah (swt). While I came across devils incarnate, I also met the finest people that the Muslim Ummah³ has produced in these times.

This small book is a collection of those experiences.

I used to meet Muslim students while speaking at Universities, their faces radiating the passion for Islam. More than that, I saw in them a promise for the future. I decided to keep in touch by sending them e-mails about my experiences.

The first story ‘The City, The Girl and The Little Rag Doll’ drew responses from people I had never met. I was amazed. Writing is not my forte but as long as people were willing to listen, I had stories to tell.

Thus started a series of stories and essays through which I recruited people and raised funds for our projects overseas. Though written at different times, I have grouped them under headings like the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The approximate date of writing appears under each title. Although these are true stories, the statements quoted—because of being constructed out of memory—are a close approximation of the actual conversations.

I dedicate this book to Allah (swt) to Whom I owe everything. My thanks are to those who encouraged and helped me to put it together. Special thanks are reserved for Syed Sarfaraz and Irum Sarfaraz for their help with editing the manuscript.

¹ God Almighty

² ‘subhanahu wa ta’ala’ meaning ‘the Exalted and the Most High’

³ Community, generally refers to the Muslim community

My experiences are a trust of the Muslims and so is this book; all proceeds are reserved for the Endowment Fund of the Nasr Trust.

Through this book, may Allah (swt) give you an insight into the lives of Muslims afflicted by wars and the Muslims who choose to work with them. I dream of the day when you will join us in our journey and this little book would have mattered in your decision.

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Nasr Trust⁴

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⁴ www.nasrtrust.org

The Balkans

The City, The Girl, And the Little Rag Doll

June 1996

The first time I came across her was in the winter of 1992 in the Bosnian town of Mostar. She had long black hair, hazel eyes and a smile that lit her face. I soon realized that her eyes refused to laugh. They held the look of bewilderment and the fear of an uncertain future. Girls as young as Aida had started understanding the misery that wars so easily delivered. They call war 'raat' in the Bosnian language, sounding like the 'night' in my native Urdu. I wonder how two languages continents apart would have the same word depicting darkness. For Mostar and its daughters such as Aida, the Balkan war meant exactly that, a never-ending darkness.

Aida's father was a young and aspiring architect before the war. Edin Batlak or Edoos had never called any other city his home. "Look", he said as we once walked in East Mostar, "my grandfather built that mosque. "As I looked up I saw a small mosque with a gaping hole in the roof, a victim of Serb shelling. "Inshallah¹, we shall rebuild it after the war with your help." I nodded. But as we walked away staring into nothingness, we silently shared the conviction that peace was far, far away.

It was its sons such as Edoos that Mostar had called upon when confronted by the Serb siege. Educated and experienced, Edoos became the chief of logistics for the Muslims and was the one to receive the supplies that we brought to Mostar from Krilo, a small Croatian village on the coast of the Adriatic. It was Edoos whose regular messages and faxes informed us when supplies ran low. As Mostar warmed up to its guests, Edoos happily filled the role of a perfect host, providing home-cooked food and putting us up for the nights. One evening he introduced us to his daughter.

Aida could not understand the strange language that we spoke. Her nine years of life had not awarded her the luxury of learning a foreign language. We tried to get by in broken Bosnian. Children are expressive and so was Aida. Soon we started understanding each other.

The war had forced the Muslims to take a fresh look at their identity and religion. There was an eagerness, especially among the children, to learn about Islam. Wanting to learn the Salat², she

¹ If Allah (swt) wills

² The ritual prayer in Islam

had started learning Fatiha³. We would teach Aida a part of the Salat in each trip with a promise of a 'Poklon' (gift) which would be candy, a rag doll or bits of that sort. The thought that a small girl eagerly awaited us in Mostar would warm our hearts many times over.

The relations between the Muslims and the Bosnian-Croats started deteriorating. Seeing the world stand by as the Muslims were being massacred and their land dismembered, the Croat nationalists grew aggressive. They also wanted a share and Mostar, a historic city of Herzegovina, was a prize.

River Neretva divides Mostar into the east, which was predominantly Muslim and the west, which had both Muslims and the Croats. The Serb front lines were a few miles east of the city, cutting off the Muslims from their strongholds in central Bosnia. West Mostar was linked through Croat-held Bosnia to Croatia. Sandwiched between the Serbs and the Croats, East Mostar was vulnerable, a fact that the Croats knew very well.

As our affair with Mostar stretched from days into weeks and then months, the town and its Muslim dwellers endeared themselves to us. As I walked the streets of Mostar, I had to remind myself that I was not a Bosnian and that one day I shall have to return to Nebraska. With time my bond with the town grew stronger, strengthened by memorable incidents and events.

I remember one day as I hurried towards a town council meeting, some children stopped me and insisted that I accompany them. They took me to a school, which had been converted into a refugee camp. The lower floor hosted the office of the Merhamet (a Bosnian relief agency), the office of the Mufti⁴ of Mostar and some rooms for medical emergencies. I was led through the dark and damp hallways to the basement where some young girls were practicing Islamic songs for an upcoming festival. On seeing a stranger, they fell silent. I urged them to continue and left after a few minutes leaving behind my cassette-recorder.

With every spin of the recorder, the songs and the memories were electronically preserved. It was to become a prized possession and a great companion for many months to come. On our long drives in Croatia and Bosnia, Abbas and I would play the tape and sing along in Bosnian:

³ A chapter of the Quran—the divine book revealed to Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him

⁴ Islamic Scholar

'O Allah, Bosnia bleeds today.
And we suffer.
But we have hope that you will deliver us.
And we don't complain.
We know You will be with us forever."

A girl had burst into tears and before the tape could be shut off, her sobs had been recorded. On coming to this section, we would gently cry ourselves, the tears cementing our determination and pushing away thoughts of giving up. 'How can we give up when children in Mostar are calling Allah and have their trust in Him (swt)?'

Many months thus passed. Once Mustafa, Edoo's interpreter, smiled when we said good-bye. "You may not find us on your return. The Croats will not wait for long!" "Never mind," we said, "we belong to this city now. If we go down, we go down together." "It is easier said than done, you know," he said. "We have been with you all these months, we would not desert you in the end." We promised.

The Bosnian Croats struck in the early hours of May 18th, 1993. The Muslims were outnumbered, outgunned and taken by surprise. The attack was so vicious that the Muslim defenses on the west quickly melted away. Hundreds of Muslim men, women and children were forced to walk in front of the Croat columns to prevent the Muslim army from firing back. By the evening, the Muslim presence in west Mostar was reduced to ashes in the fires that engulfed their homes, their belongings and their mosques. Hundreds, if not thousands, perished. The Muslims were pushed to the east side where they stood their ground and prevented the Croats from crossing the river. So began a nine-month siege that would later claim thousands more lives, inflicting pain and devastation of unimaginable proportion.

It was a typical day when the news came. We had delivered supplies to Mostar a day earlier and were preparing for the next trip. Never in our lives had four words held so much devastation: "West Mostar has fallen."

All roads leading to Bosnia were sealed. We frantically tried to find a way to get to Mostar, but to no avail. The memories of the town came flooding back: the faces, the long hours spent talking, the laughter, the mosques and the walks in the old town. The voices of the girls singing the

Islamic songs and the words of Mustafa echoed, "You may not find us..." And then there was the sinking feeling of defeat and the heart-wrenching realization that we had failed Mostar in the final moments. Our promise of being with them had been broken. With the fall of west Mostar, we felt a part of us had died.

As details of the fall started filtering out, we started asking about the people we knew. Some had survived. Some were in concentration camps. Of some, there was no news. What happened to Edo? Did he make it? How was Aida?

Then the story came out. Edo lived above the offices of the Muslim army, which were the first to be targeted. A huge fire had erupted catching all by surprise. Edo and his wife, we were told, had made it out but Aida had gotten trapped. I shudder with the thought of the painful last moments of the young Aida, trapped in the fire of a war she never fully understood; punished for a crime that her enemies are still not ready to forgive—Islam!

Had she lived, Aida would be in her teens. She would surely have completed learning her Salat.

Some say there is more to life than Bosnia. Some comment that I am hung up with all that went on. I wish they could have known that little girl and many others like her.

Aida may not be with us today, but the struggle for which she died so young continues. Bosnia is alive so are many Aidas and many lands like Bosnia. Our failure to keep our promise to Aida must not prevent us from making promises to others. For Aida, the help was too little, too late. It doesn't have to be the same for others. The understanding that we are Muslims is a promise to all the Aidas and all the embattled Muslim lands: a promise that we are with you and you shall never be deserted.

When I am down with despair and hopelessness seems to prevail, I thank Allah (swt) for giving me such treasured memories. As I look back and see a little town with a little girl with a little rag doll, I know that I have reasons to continue.

Kamila: She Dared Where Many Men Hesitated

May 1988

It was very cold on the night of October 27, 1992 as winters arrive early in Austria. A small group huddled in a tiny glass waiting room in the Vienna train station. I noticed them staring at us. Two bearded Asians didn't quite fit in. The big clock on the wall ticked noisily; it was almost midnight. Another few minutes before the train left for Zagreb in war torn Croatia. I shivered and anyone watching could have easily attributed it to cold. I knew it better: it was fear.

I took a deep breath and sat back, my hands deep inside my pockets. The previous months whirled by. It had been very hectic: the decision to go to Bosnia; interrupting my graduate studies; taking permission from my family; discovering that Abbas wanted to come along and then the million dollar question: 'how in the world are we going to get to Bosnia?'

"There is a train," a friend had told us, "that goes to Zagreb from Vienna in the night. That's your best bet. Croatia is a new country and the immigration people on the train stations are not that vigilant. They might let you in. Going to Bosnia from Croatia should be relatively easy."

And here we were with a telephone number of someone in Croatia as our only tangible plan; a couple of brothers had gone to Croatia and we were supposed to link up with them. A number, which we later discovered, was as worthless as the worn-out piece of paper it was written on. A Bosnian brother had told us of Muslims being detained while trying to get into Croatia. I was beseeched by thoughts that day: 'am I crazy? Is this a right decision: going from the luxury of a certain life to this madness of uncertainty. We still had time and maybe we should just turn back!'

The train's whistle blew furiously, jolting me out of my thoughts. Everybody started hastening towards the door. We followed with our bags. The train was ready to go. The moment had arrived.

As two strangers boarded the train that fateful night, a young girl on the other side of Europe was calmly planning her moves. There was no hesitation on her part, no afterthoughts. She would have smiled had she seen the hurried boarding of these two men in Vienna and read their thoughts.

Fate brought us together for a few moments. I dedicate this story to explain why those moments are one of the most unforgettable ones in my life.

We drifted into sleep as the train rumbled on. Our car was empty. We entered Slovenia, a former province of Yugoslavia. The Slovenes would question people passing through their territory and harass Muslims. We had been advised by our friend to lock our compartment and ignore all knocks. We would have definitely slept through but what confronted us was a loud banging. Jolted out of sleep we stared at each other. The Slovenian border patrol wanted to have a word with us two highnesses!

"Going to Jeeth-had?" said one, eyeing us suspiciously.

We politely indicated our failure to understand. If they had meant Jihad, well, the pronunciation was off, way off.

"Jeeth-had, Jeeth-had!" said another one, pointing towards his gun.

"Oh no," we managed a smile, "Humanitarna pomoch (humanitarian help)." The Serbo-Croatian phrase book had finally proven its worth.

Out came a list of names. With our Pakistani Passports in their hands—the 'Islamic Republic' boldly staring at all of us—the name tallying started. There were Mohammeds, Ibrahims, Yusufs, Abdullahs and Abdur-Rahmans. There must have been over 300 names.

We held our breaths. By the grace of Allah (swt), no one named Abbas or Suleman had done any wrong to earn a place on that list. "You have a few hours," warned the chief, clearly disappointed with the absence of our names on the list. "Go back to Vienna or continue to Zagreb. Just clear off Slovenia."

"Sure, sure, no problem," relief dripped in invisible drops from our faces, "Hvala, Hvala (thanks, thanks)."

The plan was to get up an hour before Zagreb and rehearse what we would say and how to protest if things went awry.

The stopping jerks of the train woke us up. The relief of not getting into trouble in Slovenia had worked as a tranquilizer. Suddenly there was calm. The 7 o'clock Sun lit up the compartment.

Zagreb had come!

Pulling our things together, we broke into a rush.

'What were we supposed to say?' The phrase book hid itself somewhere. 'Dobar Dan' meant 'good morning' or was it 'good night'. Maybe it was 'I am hungry'. No, no that was 'Jasem Gladan'....

The tap in the door was gentle this time. It reminded me of the famous saying, 'Barking dogs seldom bite'. It was the thought of what could be the converse that made me a little uncomfortable.

One exclaimed on seeing our passports, "Pakistanats." Which roughly translated into 'Pakistanis'. We nodded. To our utmost surprise, our nods were met with smiles and handshakes. "Pakistan is our friend," said one turning to the other, "it was among the first countries to recognize Croatia."

In no time our passports were stamped and we were on our way, thanking Allah (swt) and bewildered at the simplicity of the matter. Few physical steps were as significant as the ones we took that morning to step outside the station. It seemed as if by magic, we had entered a new world. The old world that we knew was some where in history: remote and unreachable. Our new adopted one lay ahead.

For the first time in days I suddenly became aware of the freshness of the air and the chirping of the birds; somehow the surroundings looked a lot more colorful, the grass greener and the sky a bit bluer! I can now understand how Alice must have felt in wonderland—Enchanted! The dream of going to Bosnia had materialized into a not too distant reality.

As we clumsily entered the realm of our newly found uncharted territory, the same girl, in sharp contrast, confidently made her way to her job with her letter of resignation.

We soon hooked up with other foreign Muslim relief workers and time flew by. Thousands of Bosnian Muslims languished in Croatian refugee camps. Armed with a few thousand dollars that we had collected and tons of goodwill, we kept ourselves busy while planning our ultimate move into Bosnia: we distributed flour, oil, baby-milk, detergent and medicines.

It was the first time that I was confronted with a tragedy that defied limits with shattered families and heart-wrenching tales of death and pain. At times I felt the tragedy had invisible hands, reaching out and choking my heart.

On the outskirts of the City of Split in Croatia was a house where Muslim relief workers got together in the evenings. With constant additions and subtractions, it was an interesting group. We had brothers from Egypt, the Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Algeria... The list was long. We would sip coffee and chat, exchanging stories and sharing notes. We found our smiles and laughter. It was an oasis of joy in an endless expanse of grief.

In one such evening we learnt that a group of 2,000 refugees had been placed in a remote part of Croatia. Public transportation was non-existent and few relief supplies found their way there. Deciding to help, we arranged for 5 tons of flour, powder milk, sugar, cooking oil and washing detergent and in a couple of days set off towards Orebic' (O-re-bich).

Croatia has a few hundred miles of mountainous coast that starts a few miles short of Trieste in Italy and extends all the way South to Dubrovnik, a historical Croatian town. Little islands sprinkled in the calm, blue waters of the Adriatic Sea beautify this long coastline. Within the murmurs of the waves, a highway twists along the coast. Along the way lie picturesque fishing villages and hamlets with roadside cafes, brick homes and cobblestone streets. Bigger villages have small harbors where fishing boats and trawlers rock with the breeze. 190 miles south on this beautiful coast lies the city of Split—a major port and a tourist resort. 95 miles further south is a peninsula called Peljesac (Pel-ye-shats) which extends northward—almost parallel to the mainland—carving a narrow V out of the sea. Villages on the coast of the mainland and the peninsula face each other. Orebic' lies at the northern tip of Peljesac. Rather than going south to the base of the peninsula and then going north, you can take a ferry from Ploce' (Plo-shay), reducing the travel time by almost two hours.

It was almost 2:00 PM when our truck rumbled on to the ferry. We got out and leaned across the rails. The waves striking the hull sent a fine mist all over the ferry. It was beautiful. Small islands with thick dark woods glided backward and Ploce' slowly disappeared. Sea gulls initially circled and then lost interest. Soon the ferry had docked.

The truck roared and groaned for another two hours in the Mountains before reaching Orebic'.

The sight was breathtaking! It was a clear day with a few wisps of pure white clouds. The calm and deep blue waters of the Adriatic—dotted with Islands—extended westward, blending into the lighter blue of the sky. The waves sparkled in the Sun, dancing around the few fishing boats lazily swaying in the breeze. Orebic' has brick and stone homes with small pretty gardens while others have small vineyards. Thick vines crawl up the stone walls obscuring windows and roofs with foliage. In times of peace the town would bustle with tourists from countries with harsh winters. Every third home has a bread and breakfast arrangement where tourists can spend weeks, enjoying time as it almost comes to a stop.

The town was conspicuously empty when we arrived. Stripped of its tourist income, many locals had gone to bigger towns to make ends meet. Many young men had been drafted into the Croatian Army. Although Orebic''s remoteness had helped it avoid the physical scars of the war, the social and economic hardships were apparent.

The war had brought another change in the town: Bosnian refugees. Over 2,000 of them were cramped into a few of the Government rest houses; many were the survivors of massacres and concentration camps, escaping with only the clothes on their backs. Few families were intact. Others were a saga of dear ones painfully lost to a war that had struck suddenly reducing their hopes and dreams to painful memories.

Getting to know these people was like coming to grips with this reality: “The Serb troops promised safety if we surrendered,” said Ameer, an elder from a village of around 200 people near Brcko in Bosnia. “We had little to defend ourselves with anyway. They came the next day, lined us up and took 9 young girls away, some in their early teens. We couldn't even protest”

Ameer convinced over 60 of the villagers to escape before the Serbs came back. Ameer led them into the wilderness that night; walking for days, hiding from Serb Patrols, battling fatigue, thirst

and hunger they finally reached the Muslim held area. The Serbs razed the village to the ground the next day and took the remaining to concentration camps where many died later.

We met with the refugees and delivered the supplies. We made it back in good time because the truck was empty but the journey felt like ages, as our hearts were heavy.

We made Orebic' one of our distribution points where we would show up with flour, cooking oil, canned tuna, sugar, soap and detergent. We once received a donation of 50 new overcoats for children. Ameer, who was also the representative of the refugees, refused to distribute them. "The ones who would not receive the coats may blame me for not being fair," he said and asked if we could stay and distribute them.

We came up with a formula that every one agreed with. We started with the kids who had lost both fathers and mothers, then the ones without fathers and so on. The younger would get preference. Abbas and I would put the coat on each child and stand back to see if it fitted. If it didn't, we would promise to bring one next time. If it did, the child would get the coat and a hug. The child would smile with eyes lighting up with joy. When you are stripped of all possessions, even small things mean a lot.

It was one of the best evenings of my life. The adults were smiling to see the kids laugh. I caught sight of many, hurriedly wiping off tears. They didn't want the kids to see them cry. Memories of good times—in not too-distant past—must have come flooding in. Abbas and I were more successful: we managed to laugh and crack jokes in our broken Bosnian. Though the kids laughed at our strange pronunciation, our hearts were heavy. That night as we drove back, I wept, careful to keep the sobs to myself lest Zahrudin(our driver) or Abbas found out.

I came upon an old man in Orebic', crippled by the tortures in a Serb concentration camp. He spoke of how people were forced to drink motor oil, whipped, beaten and left to bleed to death.

On hearing my name he clung to me and wept bitterly. My name 'Yusuf', as I was called in Bosnia, reminded him of his son. The Serbs had asked him the number of his sons. When he had replied one, they had dragged Yusuf in front of him. "Now you have none!" They had said, as they slit his throat in front of the father's eyes. I will never forget the embrace of that broken old man as his tears drenched my shirt.

After a few trips, the refugees in Orebic' warmed up to us. The children especially waited for us, as we used to bring donated candy and toys.

It was late December 1992 when Zahrudin and I arrived with a vanload of supplies. As the van was being unloaded, the kids gathered around us. They had all sort of stories to tell: new refugees had arrived, Croat authorities were giving troubles, a car had been stolen...This time they had a new story: a guest had come from England two weeks ago. "She is so nice!" They exclaimed. "She helps us around and plays with us too."

I first thought of missionaries. "let's go Yusuf," one of them interrupted my thoughts, "she is not that far away." I started to walk as information poured in: She teaches Quran¹—that dealt a blow to the missionary theory—and is all alone! My curiosity was growing with every step. The children took me to a home where some of the refugees lived. I sat down and waited as the lady was called.

"Assalamualaikum² brother Yusuf." I noticed the British accent, "The refugees had told me about you and brother Abbas."

She was around 20 years of age with South Indian features and not more than 5 feet tall; her slight built would not let her look short. She looked simple in a hijab³, someone you would hardly notice on an average day in a Muslim country. In Orebic', that December afternoon, she was nothing less than a mystery. I was seized with curiosity: 'who is she? What made her come? How did she make it...'

I returned her Salam and sipped on the dark bitter coffee—the only expression of hospitality that life in exile allowed the Bosnians. "I have gathered that you will be visiting the other rest house." she started out, "I would like to come along as I have to visit a seriously ill girl there."

The other camp was less than 15 miles away. As Zahrudin negotiated the turns of the hilly road, sister Kamila unfolded her story. Her parents had immigrated to England where she was born.

¹ Islam's Holy Book, revealed to Prophet Mohammed, may peace and blessings of Allah be upon him

² Islamic salutation

³ Scarf conforming to the Muslim dress code

After graduation she had taken a secretarial job in London. Moved by the sufferings of the Bosnians, she had resigned from her work and convinced the leader of a Muslim relief convoy to take her along. Citing the perils of war, they had refused to take her into Bosnia and had dropped her in Orebic'. The convoy was long gone.

The camp had arrived by then. I went off with Zahrudin to distribute supplies. As I walked around, sister Kamila's account was on my mind. She had spoken passionately, her words brimming with purpose and confidence. It must have taken a lot of courage and I was moved. I knew many men who had considered this step, only to be overcome by fear. And as I reflected back on the night in the Vienna train station, my own hesitations shamed me as never before.

We visited the girl that Kamila had come to see. She was epileptic and the war had aggravated the condition. She was in her twenties and appeared almost like a skeleton, with an ashen face and sullen gray eyes. I will never forget the eyes: their quietness was so eerie and disturbing that it dominated the whole atmosphere. It was as if she had moved beyond pain. She had felt a number of times, her face showing cuts and bruises. Her old parents sat by her side. She was like a fresh rose suddenly torn off by a violent storm, its life painfully ebbing away.

Kamila hugged and comforted her. "The medicines would be here soon." Kamila promised, "I will visit you regularly." Her words held out hope which the family was desperately looking for. As we left, I caught the parents managing a weak smile.

On the way back I was worried. Kamila had taken a brave step. What if the going gets tough? There were rumors that the Croats may force the refugees back into Bosnia. Worst still, trade Muslim refugees with the Croats being held by the Serbs. What would Kamila do? Being a Muslim and a foreigner, she could be easily singled out for harassment. Orebic' was remote; help could be days away. She could stay in Split which had better living conditions and many Muslim relief organizations. I expressed my fears to her, "we shall be returning tonight. Why don't you come along? I really think it would be safer in Split." She smiled, "No brother Yusuf, I'll be fine here. My life and death is with the refugees. Allah (swt) is with me."

We were back in Orebic'. Like always, some of the refugees had gathered to see us off and among them was Kamila. I caught sight of her and almost panicked. 'I just can't let her take this risk', I thought to myself, 'she is so young and inexperienced.' My earlier fears flooded my mind.

I walked up to her, “ Sister please think again.” I started out, my voice laden with urgency. “We will be leaving in a few moments and you can come. It could be weeks before we return.”

I glanced at the sea. The waves were catching the last rays of the sunset. The wind had picked up, gently tugging the evening fog inland. I could taste the salt, mixed with the moisture of the fog. In the distance, large dark clouds loomed. A storm was on its way. That moment of silence almost froze in time only to be interrupted by her voice: "Brother Yusuf," she was calm and composed, “I will stay.”

I turned around and waved to the group. The van lurched forward and so did time. In the mirror I could see the people dispersing. Soon the view started meshing with the shadows. We were soon out of Orebic', ascending the mountains. I took a last look. Lights glimmered then faded. The fog had moved in, wrapping the town in an eerie darkness.

I was deep in thought. Many would question what a young girl could do in such circumstances. The scene of Kamila comforting the epileptic girl drifted into my mind. The last few hours spoke differently. Kamila was a hope that had come to the refugees: a light at the end of the tunnel. A statement to the Bosnians that whatever comes, we Muslims are with you. Kamila's presence was shouting at the refugees: ‘good times will come and I want you to believe in it. Why? Because I believe in it. Look...I wouldn't be here if I didn't!’

The courage of this young sister continues to inspire me. For me, and I hope for others too, Kamila offers a model of courage, self-sacrifice, dedication and above all, the love of this Ummah⁴.

Speeches, talks, protests, and even donations can never pay the price of that one hug that Kamila had given to the sick girl. If this Ummah seeks men and women of action, Kamila will always be there among the forerunners: an example, a model, a beacon.

It was very dark. The stillness of the night broken by the continuous drone of the diesel engine. Zahruddin was silently concentrating on the road; night driving on those mountain roads was treacherous. It had been a long day and fatigue was setting in. I caught myself shivering. I hastily

⁴ The Muslim community

rolled up the window and dozed off, little knowing that it would be months before I would return to Orebic'; only to find that Kamila was no longer there.

Time flew by. An all out conflict started between the Muslims and the Bosnian-Croats and we got more heavily involved with the city of Mostar. In the end of December 1992 I had to leave for the US in a bid to raise funds.

On my return I asked Abbas if he remembered the English sister that I had mentioned to him months ago. "She is fine and still active," he said. "She was in Orebic' for a while and finally joined Amin's organization. Amin met her when he delivered some supplies there after you left." I knew that through Amin's organization she must have been able to do a lot for Orebic'.

Amin was a Sudanese brother who was studying in Bosnia when the war broke out. Fluent in the local language and familiar with the area, he had taken charge of a Muslim Relief Organization. His dedication and hard work had made him an asset for the Muslims.

"But didn't Amin have a problem with Kamila not having a Mahram (a male relative)?" I asked. Some people had commented that Kamila, being a Muslim, should not have traveled without a Mahram. It had troubled me a bit but I had placed that on a lack of a grounded Islamic education when she was growing up in England.

"Well," said Abbas, " She took care of it."

"But how?" I was perplexed.

Abbas paused. "Simple," he then smiled with a twinkle in his eyes, " she married Amin."

Bashka Voda

July 2000

“You are Yusuf, aren’t you?” I froze for a second but then quickly recovered. “No,” I smiled, “my name is Suleman.”

He was among a group of Bosnian refugees to whom I was introduced in Arizona a few years ago. I looked at his face carefully. I had never met him before.

But he persisted, “You once gave a Quran to my niece and signed your name as Yusuf.” “Really,” I acted surprised, “ what’s her name?” “Sanya Prohich.” He replied.

On hearing the name my mind drifted to Bashka Voda, a small Croatian Village on the Adriatic Sea, and to some events that would remain with me for the rest of my life.

It was the spring of 1993 and the Balkan war was sending waves upon waves of refugees to the coastal villages where tourist traffic had died down. The Croatian Government had put up these refugees in tourist resorts whose owners were being compensated by international relief agencies.

Baska Voda was 25 miles from Krilo, a village where Abbas and I had our warehouse from where we took supplies to the Bosnian besieged town of Mostar.

The war had opened the eyes of the refugees to their Islamic identity, sadly repressed through decades of Communism in Yugoslavia. They were eager to learn about Islam and relief workers like ourselves were struggling to do whatever we could.

Bosnian refugees who lived around our warehouse often came to us for assistance. On one such visit a little girl approached me with a magazine picture showing a person making Salat¹. “Can you teach me this?” she said in broken English pointing to the picture, “I love Allah, I love Islam but my father Communist, not teach me this.”

We set up class where these children learnt Quran, Salat and the fundamentals of Islam.

Musallahs² were set up in the refugee camps run by Muslim relief agencies where arrangements were made to teach Quran and Salat. On the other hand, camps run by Croatian Authorities with sizeable number of Croat refugees were a challenge and Bashka Voda was one such example. Furthermore, the relationship between the Muslims and Croats was deteriorating due the Croat-Muslim clashes in Central Bosnia and all foreign Muslims were being looked upon suspiciously.

On discovering that no Muslims were working in Bashka Voda, Abbas and I decided to give it a shot. There were around a thousand or so refugees; half of them were Muslims and the rest Croats from Bosnia.

On meeting with the Croat authorities it became clear that establishing a Musallah was out of the question. We decided to try something different.

We offered to supply food and detergent on a regular basis. They immediately agreed and the story was simple: there was no question of a shortage as the UN was funding them. Having us bring in supplies meant that some of these administrators could pocket a share. For us it was a small price for direct access to the Muslims who were at times discriminated and we could quietly help out if needed.

After a few days we told the administrators that we would like to offer English classes to the refugees. By being constructively engaged, we argued, the refugees will have fewer complaints and would relieve the pressure off the administrators. Also, we made it known that we would like to offer a course titled Historia Islama (the history of Islam). Both the Muslims and Croats can participate in the courses and the participation would be completely voluntary.

With a few days of steady supplies behind them, our dear Croat friends were all too eager not to displease us.

The Muslims were very happy so were the Croat refugees as learning English held many promises like working for international organizations desperately looking for interpreters.

¹ Ritual prayer in Islam

² Places to pray

We designed 'Historia Islama' to be the Seerah³ of our Prophet (sas⁴). Along the way we would introduce the fundamentals of Islam starting with the Aqeedah⁵ and going on to the Pillars of Islam and beyond. The course would run for three weeks.

Next we found Aida, who used to teach English in Sarajevo⁶. She readily agreed to teach the English class but 'Historia Islama' was a different story. "I am a Muslim," she had protested, "but I don't know much about Islam. How can I interpret something I don't know." We explained to her that we had no choice and all she had to do was to just listen and interpret. She finally agreed. We decided to compensate her with a modest salary.

Finally the day for the first class arrived and as we started driving towards Bashka Voda, I was fraught with conflicting thoughts. Alhamdulillah⁷ all had gone well so far but we had felt very uneasy with some of the Croat administrators and refugees. Allah (swt) has bestowed intelligence on all nations and some of them understood all too well the little game that was going on. We were, after all, foreigners who had come to aid our Muslim Brethren. While we gave food and sought to provide Islamic knowledge, there were others who were fighting against the Serbs and the Croats in Bosnia. On the way to Bashka Voda, we had at least two Croat Army check-posts, where the soldiers never failed to convey their displeasure. Yes, we were relief workers and were covered by international law in Croatia but a remote check-post could easily stir up trouble. Detention and imprisonment were not uncommon.

Reports of harassment of the Muslim refugees by the locals were getting common. The class could have been used as an excuse to foment a general backlash in Bashka Voda by saying that it was spreading Muslim extremism and fundamentalism, words that were common in the Croat Media. Alija Izetbegovich, the President of Bosnia, was being referred to by those terms.

But on the other hand, it was a golden opportunity before the refugees were either scattered in Western Europe or moved to inaccessible locations. For many that was the only time to learn the basics of Islam in a structured manner.

³ Biography

⁴ 'Sallallahu alaihi wassalam': may the peace and blessings of Allah be on him (the Prophet)

⁵ Faith

⁶ The capital of Bosnia

⁷ All praise belongs to Allah

We crossed the check-posts and Bashka Voda appeared in sight. As we took the exit to the resort where the refugees were housed, I was seized by a disturbing thought: ‘What if the refugees sharing the same fears decide not to show up? What if we are forced to drop the class after all of these efforts?’

Aida met us at the door of the dining hall where the class was to be held. It had big windows, which opened towards the sea. In peacetime this would have been home to banquets and dinners for the tourists. As we walked in we couldn’t believe our eyes: the hall was packed with over 70 people!

We said ‘Salam⁸’ and were met with ‘Walaikum Assalam’ and then all fell silent. Abbas took a chair at the back and I walked up to the front. The room was uncomfortably silent as I felt all eyes on me. Here were two strangers who had come from some far away land, looked different, spoke a different language but claimed a common interest based on a faith that they had been systematically kept away from.

I put down my book and said in my broken Bosnian, “ Kako ste (how are you).” Suddenly smiles erupted. I must have sounded funny. I introduced Abbas and myself and explained the purpose of the course.

We had children 6 years of age to boys and girls in their teens. There were some older people including mothers of some of the children.

On our first meeting Aida had extended her hand and we had explained that Muslim men were not allowed to shake hands with women unrelated to them. Aida had shared this with the refugees so when little children swarmed around us, people ran to prevent girls as young as 4 years old from touching us. We had to clarify that small children didn’t fall in the rule. I also believe that Aida had told them to show respect for the teacher, as the younger children were very quiet and well behaved.

The exception was a group of girls dressed in short skirts. The European definition of short is, well, very short. I was shocked, as this was an Islamic Class. ‘These girls have purposely decided to make fun of us’, I thought. Angry, I decided to ask them to leave but the thought of how the

class would receive this gesture prevented me. My job was to gain their trust and help them learn what we had to offer

“Where should we start from?” I asked. This raised a few eyebrows as according to the picture that Aida had painted; they were not expecting much interaction. I was supposed to have lectured like the Khutba⁹ in Friday prayer and leave; they were to listen respectfully and quietly.

I encouraged them by asking questions like how they were instructed in schools about Islam and so on. Finally, a 14-year-old sister said shyly. “Can you please start from zero. We were told in schools that there is no God.”

I was dumbfounded. This was the least of what I expected. I glanced at the rest of the class and found people nodding their heads. She was not alone.

I took a deep breath and started slowly and deliberately, as it would have been a disaster if Aida misunderstood this delicate topic. I pointed out to the wonders that surrounded us and the signs that the creations held. After introducing them to the microchip I said, “The microchip is made of Silicon, Nickel, Iron and other metals. The probability of these metals getting arranged in this order by random existed but would be one in a zillion.

“So on seeing a chip would you argue that there is no one behind its creation just because such a random possibility existed or would you accept that someone designed and manufactured it? So how about this Universe which is so much more complex.”

I gently reasoned that not believing in Allah (swt) didn't add up logically. “If we are told that a road has snipers and there is a chance that we will be hit as opposed to another road which is completely safe, which road would you take? Why would you not like to be safer? Why not apply the same logic in believing in Allah (swt)? You only gain by believing in Allah (swt) while in not believing in Him (swt) you take a risk.”

⁸ Islamic salutation

⁹ Sermon

I asked them if anyone had proof that Allah (swt) didn't exist. No one had. "The absence of the proof of a thing's existence cannot become a proof in itself of its non-existence. On the contrary, all creations are a clear indication, if not proof, of the existence of a Creator."

I was crude. It was raw Dawah¹⁰ for which I had no earlier experience. For most of the students, it was the first time this was being presented in this manner. Some nodded, some sat wondering and others were awestricken.

Towards the end I was sweating.

I found relief in the cool sea breeze as I drove that evening. Those drives became a source of strength as I collected my thoughts before the class and reflected on my return. This was my first intellectual interaction with the Bosnians of whom I had a good general sample. I had all age groups except for men of fighting age; I had both country folk and city dwellers from practically all income levels and locations.

I was impressed. I found the Bosnians to be simple-minded. They were also highly impressionable and I couldn't fathom whether it was intrinsic or due to the tragedy that had met them.

Next day we discussed Tauheed¹¹. "If there is a Creator," I said, "He must be *one* otherwise the Universe would be in chaos. Just as we can't have two captains in a plane or two drivers in a car, we can't have two gods in this Universe."

That day they were relaxed, easily smiling at my jokes. This was good news. I would also throw in sentences in broken Bosnian to the amusement of even the most serious ones.

There was another reason behind amusing the students. I wanted them engaged as the class was voluntary and the last thing I wanted was to have them lose interest.

¹⁰ Calling towards Allah (swt)

¹¹ The 'oneness' of God

I noticed that the girls with the short skirts were not there, confirming my suspicion that they had meant to tease me. The problem had obviously taken care of itself but I was proven wrong. The girls were there but were dressed differently.

After the class the same girls approached me. “We are the ones, who wore improper dresses yesterday,” one started, visibly embarrassed, “we were later told that it was not proper. We are extremely sorry. Why didn’t you ask us to leave?” With this, tears welled up in her eyes. At a loss of words, I tried to comfort them by saying that we all make mistakes and they didn’t have to worry about it.

As I drove back that evening, I was deep in thought. It was a blessing of Allah (swt) that I had not asked them to leave. They might never have returned. This became a lesson I will never forget.

The classes continued and we started with the Seerah¹² of the Prophet (sas) and along the way discussed the Kalima¹³ and the Articles of Faith.

Gradually they accepted me as a part of their small tortured world; someone who would listen and empathized with them and more than that had come to help *them*. I wasn’t able to leave immediately after class, as people wanted to talk to me. They ultimately would end up talking about loved ones dying violently in the hands of the Serbs, of destroyed towns and broken lives.

The children, who became very attached to me, had interesting questions and their laughter lit up this bleak world. There was hardly any Muslim child in the camp who wasn’t attending. I realized that this course was the only good time that they were having in their monotonous life as refugees.

As I was going through the hardship that Prophet Mohammed (sas) faced in Mecca¹⁴, I said. “We should thank Allah (swt) for giving us the present of Islam for look how difficult it was to be a Muslim at that time.”

On hearing this, a young boy spontaneously spoke and the class fell silent. Since he had spoken in Bosnian, all had understood except me. Aida tried to ignore it. Others in the class waved, asking

¹² Biography

¹³ Bearing witness that there is no Deity worthy of worship except Allah and Mohammed is His Messenger

me to carry on. I refused. “Hold on!” I caught the sternness in my voice as I asked Aida. “What did he say?”

“He has said,” Aida was fighting tears, “if it was as difficult to be a Muslim at the time of the Prophet as it is for us today?”

Looking up I saw tears streaming down faces.

I said yes and went on to explain that Allah (swt) is watching all what is happening and that He (swt) would indeed establish justice on the day of judgement.

That day as I drove home, I wept.

The time for the first test arrived. I wanted to encourage them to work hard. “Look,” I requested them a day before, “I have to drive 50 miles each day to be with you so please reciprocate by doing well on the test.”

On hearing this, an elder lady pointed out to Ahmed who was 12 years old with a quiet and serious face. “He lives 5 miles away,” she said, “while you drive, Ahmed walks to class each day.” Finding out through friends that this course was being offered, he had signed up. He was there every day and stayed till the end of the course.

A day before the test, some children came to me with a naughty look in their eyes. They wanted to know if I would be kind enough to tip them off to the questions in the test. I told them that I might ask them to explain the ‘Kalima’¹⁵ and then looking around carefully I whispered, “make sure that no one finds out.”

The next day the one answer everybody knew was about the ‘Kalima’. I put that question in the test, happy to have the participants testify in writing to the Tauheed of Allah (swt) and to the Prophethood of Muhammad (sas).

¹⁴ The holiest city of the Muslims situated in the present day Saudi Arabia

¹⁵ To testify that there is no God worthy of worship except Allah and that Mohammed is His messenger

That day I sat back and relaxed, watching the seriousness with which they were taking the test. For an outsider, it could as well have been a chemistry test.

One young sister wrote a comment: “Before coming to this course I used to believe that there is no God but now I think there is one.” For me that was progress. How stupid it would have been to enforce the dress code on her at that stage.

Another girl wrote: “ I now find strength to face the hardships I am going through knowing that my Prophet (sas) went through similar hardships in his life.”

I gave out writing assignments on different topics. I had them pool their Islamic books and also contributed some to set up a virtual library for doing their rudimentary research. These assignments would then be presented in class.

I had come to be known in the camp as Yusuf.

For the little ones I was not only a teacher but also an elder brother who knew other things as well. “Yusuf,” they would often ask, “Kad varatish (when will we return to our homes)?”

I would wince in pain, as many of them were not told that their villages had been reduced to ashes. Looking into their eyes and I would manage a smile while my heart broke into a million pieces. “ Uskuro, Ako Bogda (soon, if God wills)”

“Yusuf,” they would continue, “ we will go home once the war ends but where will you go?” “I’ll go to some other place where Muslims need help.” I would reply. “ We wish you can stay with us?” they would say. One of them had a solution. “ There is a piece of land next to my house. Why don’t you come with us and build a house there after the war. You can get married and then you can go anywhere you like.”

It was on one of the last days that an unforgettable event occurred. As I started the class, I noticed that the students were uncharacteristically quiet.

“Why are you so quiet today?” I asked.

Aida told me that there was nothing special and requested me to continue.

I put down the chalk. "I won't continue until you tell me what's going on."

They had received a notice from the Croat authorities that they would be moved to Karlovac in just a few days. I was shocked!

Karlovac was a Croatian town near the Serb frontlines. It was not safe from the Serb artillery and had limited access to relief supplies. Croats wanted to move Croat refugees to safety of the coastal areas and had also started a dirty business of exchanging Bosnian civilian men detained in Croatia with the Croat prisoners held by the Serbs. Rumors were flying that something similar could happen to refugees being moved to Karlovac.

A woman said, "Yusuf, we have lost everything in this war. Our men have been killed and our homes destroyed. We have no future. Now we are being moved to Karlovac with these little children and these young girls. How will we take care of them? Yusuf, we have no hope." She broke into sobs.

It was as if the rest were waiting for this moment. Soon all had broken down including Aida. Seeing the elders cry, the children also joined in.

As I stood speechless between them, I felt helpless, utterly helpless.

I walked towards one child and started patting his head but to no avail.

I felt rage rising within me. I was angry with the Croats and the Serbs for this terrible war, at the world that stood by, at the Muslim countries whose armies quietly watched while the whole nation was being slaughtered, mutilated, raped...

"Listen to me!" I shouted, my voice a mix of rage and sorrow.

All looked up surprised.

“Let me tell you something today,” I was shouting as if my voice would drown all sorrow. I got everyone’s attention.

“You know that you are the most unfortunate people on earth today for you have nothing, *nothing* at all. You have lost your homes, your towns, your villages, your loved ones.”

All were nodding.

“And you don’t know if you have any future or if you would ever be able to go back to Bosnia.”

“And,” I continued, “ the people in America have everything that you can imagine. Peace, homes, cars, wealth, food...They have everything that you don’t have and everything that you have lost. *Everything!*”

“But do you know,” I lowered my voice to barely an audible whisper, “ that a day will come when many in America would wish, and wish hard, that they were Bosnians like you!”

I saw eyes widen in wonder, disbelief, shock.

There was a silence for a few moments before one said in a hurt tone. “ Yusuf, are you joking with us today?”

“No,” I replied, “I am serious.”

“Are you all not Muslims?” I asked. They were away from the practice of Islam but they were Muslims all right. I had their testaments in writing.

“When a calamity befalls a Muslim,” I continued, “Allah (swt) forgives his or her sins in compensation. You have suffered so much that I believe that your sins would have been forgiven by the Day of Judgement and you will, inshallah¹⁶, enter Paradise. And at that time many Americans will wish that they were Bosnians like you.”

¹⁶ If Allah (swt) wills

I paused. My words were sinking in as looks of bewilderment started changing into ones of understanding.

“I would like to ask you a question today,” my voice was again rising, “who amongst you would like to choose to be an American and who would like to choose to be a Bosnian as you are?”

The response took me by complete surprise. Everyone raised their hands instantly, some even rising from their chairs. “Yusuf,” they shouted in almost unison, “we are happy as we are! We choose to be Bosnians! We shall not complain!” Their tear-streaked faces had lit up with smiles.

We continued the class that day as if nothing had happened.

That day they truly won my heart. While many still question why I risked my life for people who were so far away from Islam, I am and shall remain ever proud to have stood up for them.

Soon the course was over. Most of them did well in their tests and we distributed presents on the last day.

I finally bid farewell to them with a promise to keep in touch; little knowing that I would not be seeing them again.

Within a week of this farewell, Abbas and I were detained by the HVO (The Bosnian Croatian Militia) and sent to a concentration camp. On our release we found that the refugees had been sent to an undisclosed location.

As I said goodbye to Bosnia and headed home, I brought with me memories of a small town in a landscape of tragedy, Bashka Voda.

And yes, amongst the presents given out was a translation of the Quran for a little girl named Sanya Prohich. On the first page was scribbled:

‘May Allah (swt) make you a pride for this Ummah. (Ameen)
Yusuf,
June 21, 1993’

Freedom

January 1997

It was 1:30 AM on July 16, 1993. The interrogation session was over. "Time to go to bed," the commander had said. 'What an excellent statement', I had thought.

Our hands were numb with almost 4 hours of handcuffs. We had just learnt that you must never wrestle with them. They 'click' and become tighter. Mine had clicked twice before we arrived for the session, I don't know about Abbas.

By the grace of Allah (swt) the 'session' had gone well. The standard for going well was simple: no broken bones or blood. The return ride was uneventful except for the fact that we were in the van once again on our stomachs with those darn handcuffs. The soldier accompanying the driver would occasionally shine light at our faces to make sure that we were not up to any courageous acts.

As we were driven away we could hear the Croat artillery pounding away at East Mostar only 10 miles away.

We missed being in Mostar but found solace in the thought that though separated in space, we were finally united with Mostar through the pains that we were made to endure because of the Croatian assault. Unfortunately our pain could not lessen theirs.

Finally the van halted. Our own van! Captured along with us 17 days ago when we had taken a wrong turn in the treacherous HVO (Bosnian Croat Militia's) territory. It was a classic case of being the wrong people (Muslims with a record of taking aid to the Muslims in Mostar), at a wrong time (the height of the Muslim-Croat war) and at a wrong place (A HVO stronghold southeast of Mostar).

It was dark and very disturbingly quiet. The night was cool with the fragrance of heavy Bosnian vegetation. A soldier appeared from a wrecked car. Our handcuffs were removed and we were led to a shed. I noticed that there were no windows, only openings towards the roof with bars. The guard opened the door— a steel sliding one with a latch— and gave us an unceremonious shove

before locking it. I was expecting, as was the norm, a kick in the back. He must have been too sleepy, I guess. Or may be he had his share of kicking others that day.

We found ourselves in pitch darkness holding each other's hands. Now what? It was interesting how many times this question had come up in the last few weeks. Once again I was gripped by fear. I was never, I consoled myself, a very brave person anyway. I was amused at how many different forms and horrendous shapes fear can take; another addition to the long list of things that were learnt in captivity.

After 5 minutes of soothing our rattling nerves, we started to inch forward. My foot hit someone on the ground and there was a painful groan. Then the realization struck us with a shocking force! What appeared as an unorganized mass on the floor were humans; breathing, groaning, coughing beings. There were hundreds of them, covering every inch of all possible space. The atmosphere was heavy with their breaths. Finally the reality dawned upon us. We had landed ourselves in the infamous Croat run concentration camp of Chaplina.

The two of us found a little place near the door, hardly enough for a person to sit. We took turns sitting the rest of the night. We were starving, tired and cold. It was one of those times when you wished that it was all a dream and if you tried hard enough you would wake up. I felt like giving up.

Finally, daylight broke.

Dark unrecognizable forms started getting recognizable. It was as if light had sparked life in them. The sight was terrible. We counted around 700 of them, packed in an old army shed barely 80 feet by 100 feet. They stared at us with empty faces. We could tell who had been there for long. Long timers were emaciated with bones jutting out. Some managed to put up a weak smile. Someone gave us a little space. Some older men talked about how good Pakistan was in a hope to brighten us up. Some tried expressing gratitude. 'These Pakistanis must have done something good for us to be in this mess'. I found myself guessing their thoughts.

They talked about treachery, torture and death; of drinking their own urine to fight thirst; of men silently dying of illnesses and being dragged out in the middle of the night and shot in cold blood.

They talked until we could hear no more.

What struck me the most was not the physical suffering, but the lack of luster in those sunken eyes. The eyes spoke of despair and utter helplessness. I had met with war injured who were in greater pain but their eyes had sparkled with hope. But these were the eyes of the captives with little chance of freedom and little hope. That day I truly realized what it meant to be a prisoner of war. And what it meant to be free. I also looked back to how I had never thanked Allah (swt) for the blessing of freedom.

Freedom—to be able to do what you believe in; to accomplish; to achieve; to plan; to dream and to share your dreams; to be able to cry when you choose and to laugh when you like.

What I learnt in that misery I could never have learnt in my lifetime. Or for that matter, in many lifetimes!

The van came again at around 9:00 AM and took us away. We were told that there was another interrogation. This time they took a single handcuff and cuffed one hand of each of us together. But at least the other hand was free. This time we successfully managed to get by without having the handcuffs click. You learn fast in crisis, as the saying goes.

You never, as we had finally learnt, struggle with handcuffs when they are on; and that you value freedom and remain thankful to Allah (swt) for having it; and that you put it to good use and above all, you never put a price on it.

Ever!

The Caucasus

The Embattled Innocence

June 1995¹

It was dark and cold on the night of April 26, 1995. As the van inched forward, the Caucasus Mountains loomed ahead as dark masses huddled together. Suddenly the sky lit up with flashes. A relaxed mind could have counted 40 of these flashes. These were the dreaded Grad missiles, the deadliest of Russian army arsenal, pounding at Chechen villages in the mountains. As the interior of the vehicle lit up, I caught the glimpse of my Chechen companion's face—torn by rage—as he remarked, “The Russians are blowing away our children, our future, in front of our eyes. We will never forgive them. Ever!” Few things could have matched our relief as did the meeting with Muslim patrols proudly displaying green headbands with Quranic inscriptions. "Relax," said one of them, "you are in Muslim controlled territory now." I was overwhelmed with emotions. Alhamdulillah², the efforts of many weeks had borne fruit. I had finally arrived in the land of the great Imams³, Mansour and ShamyI and one of the last great forts of Islam in the Caucasus, Chechnya.

After the assault by the Russian forces on Grozny and their subsequent defeat, the strategy of the Russians is to seek a comprehensive defeat of the Dudayev's forces. Civilian centers are being targeted and humanitarian assistance is being denied to the areas held by the Muslims. The Muslims are holding the mountainous half of Chechnya and the plains are currently under the Russians. One of the major players in the conflict is the Islamic battalion that draws its strength from the Islamically motivated youth from rural areas. The ranks of the resistance now include the Chechens who fought with the Abkhaz Muslims against Georgia. Thus the name 'Abkhazia battalion' led by the fiery, born again Muslim, ShamyI. Included are also the Chechens who fought with the Azerbaijanis against the Armenians.

The most ironical yet moving was to find together the Chechens who fought with the Mujahideen⁴ against the Russians in Afghanistan and the Chechens who fought the Mujahideen as Soviet soldiers. It brought tears of happiness to my eyes when I shared time with all of them eating together and talking about Islam. Such are the moments that expose the true strength of Islam. Sultan, a former Russian soldier, who spent a year in Faizabad (Afghanistan) fighting the

¹ At the time when I wrote this article, the war in Chechnya was raging.

² All praise is for Allah (swt)

³ An Islamic leader

Mujahideen said that he had returned to fight against the Russians with a hope that Allah (swt) would forgive him for the time that he had spent fighting the Muslims in Afghanistan.

It is difficult to ignore the deep reverence to Islam, the pride and the fearlessness that permeates the whole society. "War is a frequent visitor to our land." remarked a young Chechen. "It doesn't annoy us any more. We have fought Ghazwas (Islamic term for war) for centuries."

Memories of the mass deportation of the Chechen nation to Siberia in 1945 are still fresh. I was told of how a third of them had perished in that ordeal. Many died due to suffocation and hunger in the overcrowded trains. The first ones to die on the trains were the young mothers who sacrificed their food for the kids. The Russians soldiers would not allow the dead to be buried. The bodies were placed on the railroad platforms when the trains stopped for a few minutes on the way.

With the majority of the soldiers Islamically motivated, the spirit of Jihad⁵ abounds in Chechnya. The statement that angels came down and fought is commonly heard. Many units have 100% of its soldiers performing Salat⁶. During an interview of soldiers aired on national TV, one of the most asked questions was about the number of soldiers performing Salat in their respective units. In a lot of areas under the Muslims, Shariah has been declared and Islamic courts have been set up. "The Islamic laws on our land is a guarantee of Allah's help," said Abdul-Kareem, a young Chechen. "Our defeat would mean the abolishment of such laws. See, how the odds are against the Russians now. We have Allah (swt) on *our* side."

The Russian prisoners of war are very well treated. Hundreds have been released unconditionally. Some have accepted Islam and joined the Muslim ranks. Abdullah, a 17-year-old former Russian soldier, was learning Salat when I met him. He was anxious to go to the front but this time as a Mujahid⁷ in the path of Allah. In a message to the Muslims, a Chechen commander remarked: "Tell our friends in the world that this is the place to be. Allah (swt) has opened the doors of paradise in Chechnya these days!"

⁴ Muslims who fight for the cause of Islam

⁵ The struggle for Islam, usually refers to the armed struggle

⁶ The ritual prayer in Islam

⁷ The one who fights for the cause of Islam

At the filing of this report the Russian army had captured the plains and was battling the Muslim villages at the foothill of the Caucasus Mountains. Countless refugees have been driven into the mountains. The Muslims have also strategically retreated in some areas to avoid loss of civilian lives. Most of the casualties are due to indiscriminate shelling and carpet bombing of civilian areas. The deadliest are the Grad missiles that are fired by multiple rocket launchers mounted on trucks. When fired, a series of 40 missiles completely destroy an area close to three quarters of a square km. Chemical weapons are also being used as well as special types of bullets, forbidden by the Geneva Convention. These bullets when fired have a diagonal torque. On striking, they spin around their axis laterally, extensively damaging tissue and bones. Another lethal menace are the frog mines scattered by air in civilian areas. Being green in color, they are camouflaged and deadly.

Four district hospitals are operational in Chechnya, including the one at Vedeno that I visited. Medicines are desperately short. Financial assistance is required to ensure regular salaries for the staff who have not received salaries for four months. Ambulances and 4WD vehicles are required to transport the injured to the hospitals and the civilians to safer areas. Canned food is needed. Orphans need to be supported in order to relieve the burden on the local population and to raise the morale of the soldiers.

The Muslims of Chechnya have been braving this brutal aggression for the last five months. It is but a duty on us to assist them and help to alleviate the sufferings. For centuries the Chechens have kept the light of Islam glowing in the heart of the Caucasus; we must not let this heart bleed alone today.

Martyrs Never Die

January 16, 1997

As thousands of men and women shouted 'martyrs never die' in the streets of Istanbul, millions of eyes wept around the globe for one such son of the Ummah. He had pledged on the Quran five long years ago to fight to the last against the forces enslaving a section of our Ummah¹ for centuries. Even those who doubted him then, now agree that he had finally sealed this pledge with his blood. He made true of the tradition of the many Imams, who for centuries pledged on the Quran and had fought to the end. The last Imam of the region, Imam ShamyI had fought for 24 years before the Muslims in the Caucuses were finally defeated.

Jokhar Dudayev, the President of Chechnya and the leader of the resistance is now dead. Let us together pray that may Allah (swt) accept his shahada² and bestow on him the best in the hereafter.

Though I did not meet him when I was in Chechnya in 1996, I was moved by the reverence that the Chechens held for him. They loved and respected him and responded to his calls. "Dudayev is true to our cause," said Abdul-Karim, a young Chechen, when asked whether Dudayev may compromise with the Russians, "we don't believe he will ever sell us out."

Abdul-Karim was right.

Dudayev was born in 1944 and as an infant went through the mass deportation of the Chechens to Siberia in which one third of the nation perished including Dudayev's father and an elder brother. "Russian history is one of barbarism, stealing and killing, especially here," Dudayev was recently quoted by Associated Press, "we Chechens wear this history in our genes."

Dudayev encouraged Islamic awakening among the Chechens and his troops. In a symbolic gesture, the weekly holiday was shifted from Sunday to Friday shortly after his taking control. Many religious minded commanders quickly rose in ranks among his army like Aslan Maskhadov and ShamyI Basayev. "We have turned away from the Western democracies and we look to Islamic virtues." Dudayev had said. A painting of Imam Mansour, a legend from the historic

¹ The Muslim Community

² To die for the sake of Allah (swt)

struggle of the Muslims against the Russians in the last century, hung in his office in Grozny. The picture and its dwellings were destroyed in the Russian raid on the City.

His death is a loss for all of us.

Let us use this moment of grief to once again cement our determination. To struggle and die for the cause of Allah (swt) is better than a thousand lives; the dream of raising the name of Allah (swt) is a dream that lends meaning to our lives. It is something worth living for. And something worth dying for.

Remember that in such a death lies our true life.

And that 'martyrs never die'.

The Battle for Grozny

September 6, 1996

It was the beginning of August 1996 and the 20-month vicious war in Chechnya seemed far from over. With over 40,000 troops in a region 80 miles by 80 miles, backed by heavy artillery, round-the-clock air support, thousands of tanks and armored personnel carriers, the havoc wreaked on Chechnya is unimaginable. Entire cities have been reduced to rubble and whole villages have been obliterated, leaving behind over 35,000 dead or missing, over 300,000 displaced and thousands injured.

Yet despite all odds, the outnumbered, outgunned men of faith battle on. The Chechens, with a combined population of 1.2 million and only 15,000 poorly equipped soldiers, face the mighty Russia—a superpower less than a decade ago, with a population of 152 million and 1.7 million men under arms. The Red Army of the former Soviet Union instilled fear in the hearts of the West for decades and justified the existence of NATO and the billions of dollars that went into its inception and maintenance.

The war that Pavel Grachev—the former defense minister of Russia—stated would be over in 2 *hours* consumed 4,000 of his men in the first few days in the famous battle for Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. In Russian, Grozny means 'terrible'. It was a fort set up to spearhead the Russian onslaught on the Northern Caucasus in the 19th century. Today, the same city with its symbolic name stands as an ironic reminder of the destruction that has befallen the invading Russian troops for centuries. In 1996, this legacy of destruction continued as Grozny, true to its name, defied any form of submission or surrender.

After two months of heavy destruction by the sheer firepower of Russian artillery and air bombardment, the Muslim fighters chose to leave Grozny in early 1995. Too many civilians were dying. The city's life was gradually and painfully ebbing away. They left with a promise to come back. "The war in Chechnya started in Grozny and we shall end it in Grozny!" promised Shamil Basayev, a Chechen field commander.

The Russians understood that a Chechen promise is written with blood. Thus no time was wasted in making Grozny invincible. A division of 9,000 troops and motorized armor and tank battalions were brought into the city. Two former airbases *outside* the city, Sverny and Khankala were

fortified and converted into combined air and army bases. Sverny and Khankala provided the bases for Russian aerial bombardment for Chechnya and 24 hour air support for Grozny. Every major intersection of Grozny became a fortified Russian checkpoint monitored by commandos and elite troops. Russians were taking no chances. The memories of the losses of their comrades in the early days of the war were far too fresh.

In early August 1996 the Russians received a paper signed by Zelimkhan Yanderbiyev, current President of Chechnya, warning of an imminent attack. Leaflets requesting civilians to leave were distributed in Grozny.

The Russian reaction? Laughter. The absurdity of the proposition was globally acknowledged. True to their word, 3,000 lightly armed Chechen Muslims struck Grozny in the early hours of Tuesday, August 6, 1996. Two other major cities, Gudermes and Argun, were also simultaneously attacked.

Within a few hours of hand to hand combat the Muslims had broken through the defenses of Grozny. A large number of heavy Zenith anti-aircraft guns were captured and quickly mounted on jeeps. Stores of air to surface helicopter gunship missiles were captured. Metal tubes were modified to serve as launchers to use the same missiles against the deadly Russian helicopter gunships as surface to air projectiles. The Russian military command center came under heavy fire within hours of the assault.

As the battle raged on in Grozny, Argun—the second largest city and only 15 miles away from Grozny—fell to the Muslims on the first day of battle.

Gudermes, 25 miles from Grozny, the second largest city, fell on Friday the 9th of August, on the eve of the inauguration of Yeltsin's second term in office. In Grozny, the Muslims on the same day sealed off the Sverny airbase and took over the center of the city, trapping a Russian armored convoy and hundreds of Russian infantry troops.

Admitting an out of control situation, Russia declared a nation-wide day of mourning on Saturday, August 10th. Yeltsin's inaugural celebrations were cancelled. The Russians admitted 70 deaths while the Muslim count was over one thousand.

The same day the Russian army received orders to retake the city at all cost without any consideration of men or machines. Wave after wave of armored personnel carriers, tanks and helicopter gun-ships attacked but to no avail. By the grace of Allah (swt), the Muslims gallantly stood their ground.

By Saturday evening, over 7,000 Russian troops were under siege in Grozny. Furthermore, Russian news agency Interfax reported the death of 150 Russian troops in a single ambush in Kurcholai region. The battle for Grozny was in its 6th day and Russia had already lost over 230 tanks and Armored Personnel Carriers.

Grozny made international headlines. At 6:14 PM Saturday, Reuters quoted Nicholas Burns, the State Department spokesman, as saying, "The United States is watching with great concern and great disappointment the fighting this week in Chechnya, this time clearly caused by the Chechen rebel offensive." (I wonder how a Muslim advance became disappointing and how Chechens in their own homeland became rebels!)

On Monday, August 12, the Muslims in a bold move outside Grozny launched a major assault on Khankala airbase.

On Wednesday, August 14, after only 9 days, the world gasped and Russia winced in pain as the dust of the battle settled down. The Russian military was comprehensively defeated with at least 2,000 casualties though the Muslim count was over 4,000. A week later, Russia airlifted over 500 bodies of its troops to Moscow. Many more Russian troops had died and were buried by Muslims to avoid decomposition. In total at least 250 tanks and APCs¹ were destroyed, 12 fighter planes were shot down, over 1,300 Russian troops were taken captive and 7,000 of them were to remain under siege for the coming two weeks.

Once again, the help and Grace of Allah the Almighty humbled the might of the Red army through the strength of faith of a few Muslims. As Allah (swt) says in the Quran:

‘Those who are convinced that they will meet Allah say how oft by Allah's will has a small force defeated a large force’.

"To the Kremlin they are nothing but 'a terrorist gang' and 'a bunch of bandits'," reported Alastair McDonald, a Reuters correspondent in Chechnya, "But the Chechen rebels now fighting in Grozny have again served notice on the Russian army that they are a force to be reckoned with."

The following week Russia opted for peace. Just short of accepting defeat publicly, Alexander Lebed, Security Chief of Russia declared that Russian military was currently incapable of continuing the war in Chechnya. "I knew that things were not good there", remarked Lebed after his fact finding mission to Chechnya, "but I never imagined they were so bad." Lebed further accused senior Russian officers of deploying Russian troops in Grozny as 'Cannon fodder'.

Finally on August 31, Alexander Lebed signed a peace agreement with the Muslim army's Chief-of-staff Aslan Maskhadov, bringing the war to an official end. Russian army was to quit Chechnya leaving the Muslims to a state of self-rule. The Muslims agreed to defer the final decision on independence for a period of 5 years after which a referendum would be held.

The peace treaty and deferral of the question of independence was a very wise move by the Muslims as it allowed the defeated Russian military to save face and withdraw with whatever little dignity it had. In reality the self-rule was nothing short of independence.

"To interpret this as going back on our current status is not correct," stated President Zelimkhan Yanderbiyev. "We are not part of Russia. We are simply leaving a lot of space—in time and politically—for the establishment of bilateral relations. *We are an independent state!*"

On Friday, September 6, as the Russian military initiated talks about 1,300 Russian prisoners of war in Muslim hands, thousands of Chechens held victory celebrations all over Chechnya. The day also coincided with the 5th anniversary of the declaration of independence.

We thank Allah (swt) for this victory. As the Chechens celebrated among shouts of 'Allahu Akbar²', the Muslim Ummah smiled through tears.

¹ Armored Personnel Carrier

² Allah is Great

'And also (He will give you) another (blessing) which you love: help from Allah and a near victory. And give glad tidings to the believers. (Quran)

Central Asia

Tajikistan: A silent victory for all of us.

June 1997

As I looked out, I became oblivious to the drone of the propellers of the Russian-built military transporter. The view was breathtaking. From the dusty terrain rose the majestic snow capped peaks of the mighty Hindu Kush, which divide Afghanistan into the North and South. Many armies have perished on its slopes since time immemorial. The Soviets had battled with the Afghans and the Hindu Kush and had lost to both. I tried looking beyond the peaks into the haziness of the April morning towards my destination, the camps for Tajik refugees near the Afghan-Tajikistan border.

In April 1997, as the war escalated in Afghanistan, the only route through the Hindu Kush into Northern Afghanistan, the Salang Pass, was closed. I was left with only one choice: to fly into Mazar Shareef, the de facto capital of Northern Afghanistan, and then to travel by land through the shifting frontlines to Kunduz and Takhar, the Afghan provinces bordering Tajikistan.

As Mazar appeared into sight, I caught myself taking a deep breath. The anticipation of what lay ahead was disquieting.

Tajikistan is one of the six newly independent Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union. Lying to the north of Afghanistan, it has Uzbekistan on the west, China on the east and Kyrgyzstan to the north. Over 85% of the 5.8 million people are Muslims. Tajikistan is mountainous and is spread over an area of 143,100 sq. km (slightly smaller than Wisconsin).

In 30 Hijra¹, an Islamic army, led by Al-Ahnaf ibn Qaus, captured the city of Takharistan. In 88 Hijra, the remaining areas of Tajikistan—then called Eastern Bukhara—were captured along with Bukhara and Sumarqand and the region now known as Central Asia. A glorious history was written as Bukhara and Sumarqand later became the center for Islamic learning and scholarship.

Russia occupied Tajikistan in 1880, initiating a century of brutal oppression with over 70 years of communist rule. An armed uprising in 1921 was brutally crushed and efforts were made to stamp out the Islamic identity of the Muslims. Thousands of scholars along with hundreds of thousands

¹ The beginning of the Islamic Calendar (579 AD)

of Muslims died in massacres, which continued till the death of Stalin. During this period some scholars escaped to the mountains and kept the torch of Islam burning.

In the early seventies, these scholars secretly started returning and teaching Islam to the people in the cities. The year 1975 saw an Islamic reawakening, especially among the students, which became an Islamic political force after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Tajik parliament declared independence on September 9, 1991 after which a vicious power struggle started between the Muslim and the communist parliamentarians. A series of coups and counter-coups saw the Islamic democratic coalition gain power with popular support.

The communists supported by the Russian and Uzbek military attacked the capital Dushanbe and seized power in December 1992. Over 100,000 people were massacred, 30,000 were wounded and another 100,000 fled into Afghanistan.

In the three years of guerrilla warfare, the Islamic coalition led by Nahzat-e-Islami (Islamic rebirth party) gained control of over 50% of rural Tajikistan whereas the capital and other major towns remained under the communist regime. Though many have made their way back into Tajikistan, up to 20,000 refugees remain stranded in Afghanistan.²

Gradually the communist regime was weakened due to the protracted civil war and the inability of Russia to support it, thanks to the Chechen war, which distracted and humbled the Russian military machine. A cease-fire was reached in 1996 and talks aimed at establishing a coalition government are going on. There is hope that the refugees may return home. Until then, their struggle for survival and a meaningful existence will continue.

A combination of public transport (not very sophisticated, needless to say, in war-torn Afghanistan) and hitching rides took me and Haroon—our Peshawar³ based guide and interpreter—a distance of 200 miles from Mazar Shareef to the dusty city of Kunduz. The province and its capital have the same name: Kunduz.

² Later a peace agreement was signed and the refugees moved back into Tajikistan. The following essays will deal with that.

³ A city in Pakistan near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border

Kunduz has frequently changed hands with the swinging fortunes of the war between different factions. With all that, not much remains in the city. The only sign of life is the main market bustling with activity as traders barter and sell goods. Being a provincial center, people from neighboring areas swarm into it. You can buy anything in Kunduz: cattle, vegetables, medicines, hand made rugs, Klashnikov rifles, rocket launchers...

A few miles north of the city towards the border with Tajikistan lies the largest Tajik refugee camp, Bagh-e-Shirket, housing up to 6,000 refugees. As we entered the camp I was struck by the silence shrouding the 5 square mile encampment of mud huts. Smoke rose gently from some of the huts as the people cooked. A midsize river lazily snaked its way along the eastern edge of the camp. At a distance in the South, snow peaked mountains were catching the reddish hue of the setting sun. A failing mud wall encircles the camp. I saw people quietly going about whatever little business they had. The undertone of quiet resignation could not be ignored.

As my hours in the camp turned into days, I was saddened by the tragedy of the refugees: missing loved ones, shattered families and broken dreams. Even the laughter of children has a quietness that never lets one forget that many of them are orphans.

Bagh-e-Shirket has a life of its own. I felt as if I were in a different world altogether, a painfully simple one with no electricity, no gas and no running water. Access to food and health care is limited. Forces of nature are brutal in Kunduz. The mercury reaches 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the summers and the winters are equally harsh and unforgiving. Malaria and typhoid assume alarming proportions, stealing away lives that the civil war across the border couldn't take.

It appears as if time is in no great hurry in Bagh-e-Shirket. There is nothing much to do. Many of the men are in Tajikistan with the guerrilla units, while others are just memories now, a reminder to their children and widows—some widows just in their teens—that being Muslims is not always easy. The remaining men toil to eke out an existence; some cut wood in the forest to sell while others go after the few jobs that war ravaged Kunduz offers. One of the top entrepreneurs that I came across was the bright-eyed young Ahmed. With some savings that his family had managed to salvage, he had bought a donkey and a cart. Ferrying people between the camp and Kunduz guaranteed a better living. I was met with a sad smile when I asked Ibrahim, 50, a father of seven,

as to how many times a month they could afford meat. “It is once a year,” he sighed, “during Eid al Adha⁴ when the relief organizations conduct the Zabeeha⁵ program.”

Marriages, albeit very simple, do take place in the camp, bringing a sense of happiness and a break from the tiring monotony. The community considers its growth important; far too many lives were lost in the war. I asked the camp doctor how many children were born each month. “Around 30 a month,” he replied and then corrected me, “you should asked how many Mujahideen⁶ are born?”

A group of five Muslim relief organizations struggle to make existence bearable. BIF⁷ runs a clinic, an orphan sponsorship program, and a sewing center to provide clothes for the camp. An organization from Kuwait runs a couple of Tandoors (ovens) providing a staple of bread while others run regular and Quran schools. Foreigners, especially young Arab brothers who came to fight during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and decided to stay, run these projects. They have gradually become a part of Bagh-e-Shirket speaking fluent Persian and dressing traditionally. “This is my home now,” said Basheer, a young Algerian, when I asked about his future plans, “I can’t see myself deserting these people.”

The collective trauma of the war, personal tragedies and life as refugees has failed to break the will of these people. Under the quiet resignation lies a deep-rooted determination. At the height of the guerrilla war these camps had served as the launching ground for military expeditions where teary-eyed wives and children would bid farewell to their husbands and fathers knowing that they may never come back. A generation is coming of age in this camp, opening its eyes to the freshness of freedom. The passion for Islam, which 70 years of brutal communist rule couldn’t snuff out, kindles the souls of these people.

The Nahzat-e-Islami has set up a school system in cooperation with the Muslim organizations. It is a great achievement, as the children are kept constructively engaged. There are four schools for boys and girls, where everyday these former Soviet citizens memorize Quran. As I walked into a classroom, the children—some as young as 7—fell silent and looked up. It was as if the future of Tajikistan was looking back at me—a bright and promising future. Within these mud walls in a

⁴ An Islamic festival in which animals are slaughtered and some of the meat distributed to the poor.

⁵ A program in which animals were slaughtered in the camps on behalf of other Muslims

⁶ The plural of Mujahid, a person who fights for the cause of Islam

⁷ Benevolence International Foundation

forgotten corner of the world is a force being nurtured which all the Communisms and systems of the world will never be able to defeat.

I had some students write about their experiences. “My father was martyred in 1992,” wrote Gul Khumar, a 15-year-old girl who attends a sewing center. “I was in second grade then and there was no Islamic teaching. We emigrated to Afghanistan just for Almighty Allah.”

“When I was six years old the war started in Tajikistan and we emigrated to Afghanistan.” Wrote 11 year old Suraya. “Our life was nice in Tajikistan. We had a car and other things. We did not need anything except Islam. We were deprived of Islam and [were] getting only Russian knowledge. Because of Islam, war started between the Communists and Muslims. My grandmother, grandfather, father and three uncles were martyred and we emigrated to Afghanistan.”

Eleven years old Tamara has memorized ten juz⁸ of the Quran after coming to Kunduz in 1992. She wrote: “I was in second grade, my sisters were four and two years old, my brother was two months old and my mother was thirty (when we emigrated to Afghanistan). We emigrated as it is the Sunnah⁹ of the Prophet (sas) and we wish to have a green flag with ‘La ilaha illallah Mohammad-ur-Rasulallah’¹⁰ written on it in Tajikistan.”

I met old men with flowing long beards, bent backs and hardened faces, who passionately speak of their struggle during the Communist rule, of hiding for years in the mountains, the hardships, the tortures and the deaths. Though the struggle continues, they are aware that the worst is over and a bright tomorrow is not far away. In spite of all that they lost in the bitter hundred years, they outlasted Russia and Communism. As the statues of Lenin and Karl Marx are being disgraced in Russia, the mountains of Tajikistan are echoing with Azans¹¹.

As much as I was saddened by the hardships of these brave people, I was strengthened by their determination, their love for Islam and their willingness to sacrifice for it.

⁸ Chapters

⁹ Tradition

¹⁰ There is no deity worthy of worship except Allah and Mohammed is the prophet of Allah.

¹¹ Call for prayers

With the help of Allah (swt), they have brought about a silent victory for Islam in Central Asia. A victory that will, inshallah¹², impact millions of lives for centuries to come.

Once again, falsehood has lost to the faithful few in a forgotten frontier of the Islamic world—Tajikistan.

¹² If Allah (swt) wills

Sham-e-Gul

October 1997

Two weeks ago I was in a TB sanatorium for orphans at Kofar Nihon, a small town 10 miles from Dushanbe, the capital of war-ravaged Tajikistan. As I entered one of the wards, Sham-e-Gul dragged herself to the corner of the bed and sat up. Like many others around her, TB has wasted her legs. I found her in pain and with no relatives at her side to console her. Her brother visits her twice a month. Sham-e-Gul is only six years old.

The staff and children of the sanatorium are Sham-e-Gul's family. She misses Daulat Shah, another six-year old who was sent home when some relatives visited a few weeks ago. "There is nothing more we could have done for Daulat Shah", said Dr. Nazir Rahimov. "We figured at least he would have a home and hopefully adequate food in his last days". Sham-e-Gul was not told why Daulat Shah left suddenly. She is too young to understand.

During the Soviet era, orphans who had TB were admitted to the sanatorium. When the war broke out, Kofar Nihon came under heavy fighting. People fled the area, leaving a skeleton staff that battled to keep the damaged facility running. With no electricity and an acute shortage of medicine, food and money, the orphans had nowhere to go. The sanatorium became a death trap, as the symptoms of TB grew worse. Soon, the children had started dying. I found thirty-two children there, between the ages of six and fifteen. Most have been there for the last five years and many with advanced TB.

The four long years that BIF¹ had worked with the Tajik refugees in northern Afghanistan came to an end in the summer of 1997. By the Grace of Allah (swt), the Communist regime in Tajikistan gave in and signed a peace agreement with the Muslim opposition, ending more than four years of bitter conflict. This is a great victory for the Muslims as they now control around 50 percent of the territory and are partners in the newly formed coalition government.

The Tajik refugees from the neighboring countries have returned to their homes with dignity. Now we can concentrate on projects in Tajikistan that badly need our assistance like the sanatorium in Kofar Nihon. With the blessings of Allah (swt) and Muslims, we are determined to

¹ Benevolence International Foundation

turn things around in Kofar Nihon. We could, Inshallah², initiate surgeries which are long overdue, provide proper medicine, food and hygiene, fix the building and heating and provide decent salaries for the staff. For Daulat Shah we were too late, but for the remaining 32 children we still have time.

As I was leaving, I gave my pen to Sham-e-Gul to cheer her up. This was the least I could have done. She had smiled and the thought of it still warms my heart. With the pen I also gave her a silent promise that I would leave no stone unturned to see that she and the other children got a decent chance at life.

² If Allah (swt) wills

Malika Pasha

November 1998

It was a crisp October morning as I walked into the remains of the home of Malika Pasha in Takhan, a small beautiful village 70 miles South of Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan. She was happy to see us, her children crowding around us, knowing that every month the Foundation's officers deliver their monthly sponsorship money.

I looked around the destroyed house and asked Basheer, our manager, to translate as Malika spoke.

Malika Pasha had every thing before the war. She lived with her husband Khaleel and five children—four girls and a boy. Khaleel earned a modest living working as a commercial driver.

As war erupted in Tajikistan in 1992, the communists prepared to attack the Muslim villages. Khaleel stayed behind to fight and sent his family further south of the country. Malika left with Shamsi, 14; Jamal, 12; Mahistan, 9; Mahbano, 7 and Zeba, a mere 2 years old.

The war escalated and ten of thousands of refugees crossed into Afghanistan. Many thousands perished in front of the Advancing Communist army while thousands drowned trying to cross the river Umu between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Malika made it safely with all her children. It was not long when the devastating news came: Khaleel was dead—mercilessly killed by the Communists—and the house burnt to the ground. He was quietly buried, Malika was told, in the village graveyard.

Only 35 years old, Malika was now a widow with five children and a new life of hardship in the refugee camps.

She sent Jamal and Mahbano with a heavy heart to orphanages in Pakistan with a hope that they would learn Islam and for another obvious reason: she would only have three children to feed. In the next few months she married Shamsi—only 15 then—to an aspiring young Doctor named Mohammed Shareef. It was a joyous occasion marked by a painful emptiness, as the father of the young bride was absent.

Malika was blessed with a grandson in 1995 in the refugee camp. They named him Mohammed Iqbal.

Life was hard in the camps. Saying goodbye to his wife and his few months old son. Shareef left for Russia to look for a job.

A few months later Shareef became a victim of the crime wave that has gripped Moscow. He later died in a hospital with multiple stab wounds.

Now Malika had another widow in the family; Shamsi was barely eighteen.

After the peace agreement in 1997, along with other refugees, Malika's family returned to what remained of their house. They now make their living in a small room which escaped major damaged. She was able to visit Khaleel's grave, a short walk from her house, for the first time in five long and bitter years.

Zeba is now 8 and knows her father by the few pictures that Malika had managed to salvage. Mahbano, 13 recites Quran beautifully which she had learnt in her 3 years in Pakistan. Mahistan is 15. Jamal, 18 is in an Islamic school in Pakistan. Now 20 years old, Shamsi is chronically ill due to some infection she contracted in Afghanistan. The only one to escape the torturous memories is the three-year-old Iqbal. He will have to wait a few more years to understand the havoc that has wrecked his family.

We have started a project to build the houses of families such as Malika's.

We can't bring back the loved ones for Malika's family—or other such families—or reverse the clock. Building homes is the least we can do for the children of those who died fighting for Allah (swt) and Islam.

Sham-e-Gul Again!

November 1998

As I approached her bed, Sham-e-Gul woke up and squinted—it was a bright day and sunlight was streaming into the ward from the large windows. The startled look in her eyes slowly changed to recognition.

I had first met her in Kofar Nihon, a village 15 miles from Dushanbe, almost a year ago. She was the youngest of 32 children with advanced TB in a war-damaged hospital. With no electricity for several years, no heating, shortage of staff, food and medicine, the children—many of them orphans with no place to go—had started to die. I had given her my pen with a promise that I would leave no stone unturned to see that she and the other children got a decent chance at life.

Now 11 long months later, I looked around the brightly-lit ward of neatly lined beds with clean linen. I could smell the freshly painted walls. 15 children slept peacefully. Now there is no shortage of food or medicine. The repair on the wrecked heating system has started, which means heating for the hospital for the first time in 5 years. I could hear the clamor of the workers repairing the remaining part of the hospital.

It had been a struggle. Within a month of my return from the last trip, we had moved our staff from Afghanistan to Tajikistan and recruited new officers including Dr. Nazr-ul-Islam, a surgeon from England. With Kofar Nihon continually under heavy fighting, we shifted our focus to a similarly neglected Hospital in relatively safer Dushanbe—only to find what relative safety meant when one of our officers was shot and killed. We decided not to give up.

Taking the hospital from the Ministry of health, we started the repairs. BIF¹ started to provide food, medicine, lab facilities, salaries and the operating costs. We serve 52 children with TB between the ages of 3 to 14 years.

I asked Sham-e-Gul about the pen that I had given her. She broke into an embarrassed laughter: she had lost it.

¹ Benevolence International Foundation

By the grace of Allah (swt)—and to the astonishment of the doctors—she recovered from her paralyses. I believe that it had more to do with the prayers of the Muslims who had come to know her than medicine. I asked her if she could walk for me. When she nodded, I helped her out of bed. She hesitantly took the first step and slowly walked the length of the room.

I handed her the picture that I had taken with her the previous year. She held it in both her hands for a few moments then looked up and studied my face carefully, as if confirming whether I was indeed the same person. She said she wanted to keep the picture and asked me not to leave. I was saddened, as I didn't know where her parents were or whether they were alive. I promised her that I would come again.

I walked out with tears of gratitude to Allah (swt) and the Muslims who by their generosity helped me fulfill a promise made in a far-away, war-ravaged land to a seven-year-old ill girl—Sham-e-Gul.

Basheer: A friend's farewell

March, 1999

The assassin didn't have to wait for long in the cold winter morning: Basheer was seldom late.

I was in Florida raising funds when the news came. It was a shock: I was with him just a couple of months ago. The sequence of events, as they probably occurred, flashed into my mind.

Basheer had to be in the office in Dushanbe—the capital of Tajikistan—by 8:00 AM to let the other officers in. Dawlat Baig picked him up at 7:40 AM, 100 hundred meters from his apartment in the suburbs. Facing a wholesale market, the street is very busy in the morning. I had accompanied Dawlat Baig a number of times. As we would pull up the car, Basheer would appear out of the sea of people, walking fast with long purposeful strides with an air of confidence and mission. To be at the intersection on time he would have left at least 5 minutes earlier, putting him in the line of fire at precisely 7:35 AM on Monday, January 11, 1999.

The first time I met him was at the Tajik refugee-camps in Afghanistan in 1997. He was tall, slim and strongly built. He had become fluent in Persian and wore traditional Afghan dresses. What gave him away were his strong Arab-Berber features. A smile was never far from his stern face, which spoke of years of struggle and hardship.

The oldest son of a government officer, he came from a village 200 miles from the capital of Algeria. He gave up his studies in Engineering to help out in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion. He later joined BIF¹ to provide relief assistance to the Tajik refugees in Afghanistan.

Life was hard in the camps in Kunduz and Takhar—the northern Afghan provinces bordering Tajikistan—with no electricity, running water or communication with the outside world. Food and medicines were always limited. Malaria, Typhoid and TB were close to assuming epidemic proportions. Basheer was going down with Typhoid every year, spending weeks in bed.

Kunduz was a lawless area then. A few months prior to my trip, bandits had fired at his jeep, narrowly missing him. None of these challenges had shaken his resolve.

I once asked him how he managed to stay there for five years. “I can’t see myself deserting these people.” He had said: “I see myself as holding a post. If we leave, the vultures will come in.” He was referring to some of the secular organizations. Alarmed by the return of the Tajik refugees to Islam, they were trying to get the Muslim relief organizations to leave. These organizations had one camp in their control where they distributed music and movies while the children in the Muslim-run camps learned Quran.

He had kept in touch with his family through letters, which would take up to six months to get to Algeria from the forgotten Mountains of Afghanistan. Basheer’s younger brother, whom he had last seen as a young boy, was in college now. One of his sisters had gotten married. We decided to arrange for a phone call. Using a wireless set, we connected via radio to Peshawar and then through telephone to Algeria. It was a joyous occasion, as the family hadn’t heard his voice in five years. They initially failed to recognize him as out of emotion, he could only speak in his adopted Persian. He had broken down during the call and wept.

Basheer managed a staff of 24 Tajik Muslims in the refugee camps and I could see the love and respect that flowed towards him. I didn’t have a shred of doubt that these Tajiks could have easily stood in the line of fire for him.

He was like a father to the orphans who had known him for 5 years and loved him dearly. Some, who were orphaned very young, didn’t know their fathers but they knew Basheer. I asked some of the young orphans—I didn’t ask the older kids, as they understood—where the money for their sponsorship came from. They pointed to Basheer. I explained that Basheer was just an officer and the money came from the Muslims in the US. They weren’t convinced: it was Basheer who cared for them and had been with them for years. To those little, simple minds that was what really mattered. I gave up. I wish I could tell them now that Basheer gave much more than care: he ultimately gave his life.

This dedication and compassion endeared Basheer to the Tajik Muslims. He loved them and yes, they loved him. He had gradually become an inalienable part of the Tajik cause, a hero who had come from a far away land. As the Tajik Muslims struggled in their war against the Communists, Basheer stood by them, supporting their orphans, running clinics, sharing their joy and wiping

¹ Benevolence Int’l Foundation

their tears. His presence whispered to the Tajiks, ‘I believe in you and your struggle. Don’t give up.’

A cease-fire took hold and there were reports that the refugees may move back to Tajikistan. Basheer asked me whether we would move BIF into Tajikistan. I told him that we were thinking about it. “If BIF goes into Tajikistan, I would like to continue with you.” He said. I asked him what he would do if we didn’t move in. He paused. “I belong to the Tajik struggle. I will go to Tajikistan with the refugees.”

In the summer of 1997, the refugees started moving back into Tajikistan bringing an end to the five years of exile. Deciding to start work in Tajikistan, we established an office for BIF in Dushanbe in November of 1997 and later arranged for Basheer and the staff to move from Afghanistan.

A few months after moving to Dushanbe, Basheer married a Tajik sister by the name of Sadbarg—the only child of a local family. The mother requested Basheer to move in their apartment where they had lived for so long. She was widowed in this apartment when Sadbarg was very young. Basheer agreed.

The Muslims signed a peace agreement with the Russian backed Government and the overall situation started to improve.

We took Dr. Nazr-ul-Islam—a surgeon from England—to Dushanbe and established a TB hospital for children. Furthermore, we continued with the sponsorship of the orphans; started supporting families of men disabled in the war and started rebuilding homes of orphan families destroyed during the war.

A group of young sisters, who had set up an Islamic study group in Dushanbe, approached us for help. Concluding that the sisters were high on enthusiasm but low on knowledge, we decided to teach them the fundamentals of Islam and prepare them to reach out to more women in Dushanbe. We gave Nurudin—a graduate of the Islamic University in Medina²—the charge of the program.

² A holy city in Saudi Arabia

Nurudin had come to Afghanistan in 1993 and had set up an Islamic School for Tajik students in the refugee camps. This is when Basheer and Nurudin became friends. After the cease-fire, Nurudin had moved independently to Tajikistan where he had also married a Tajik sister. He had started some Dawah³ programs in the mosques in and around Dushanbe.

When we decided to sponsor the Sister's Dawah program, Nurudin was like a gift from Allah (swt): he was there; married to a local sister; spoke fluent Persian and above all, was a gifted scholar.

The classes started in March of 1998 with a group of 32 sisters and 20 brothers.

Unfortunately, the political situation started deteriorating. Soon it became apparent that a cold war was taking shape fueled by the Secular and Communists elements to undermine the Islamic movement in Tajikistan.

On June 15, 1998, only three months since the start of classes, Nurudin was shot and martyred outside his apartment. Only 36, he left behind a pregnant wife and a four-month old daughter, Asma.

No one claimed responsibility and the Tajik Government denied any involvement. 'Could it have been the Russian intelligence?' we were left wondering, 'Or could it be the breakaway Communist faction—which had split from the Government—and violently opposes the peace agreement?'

Nurudin was also involved in Dawah programs in some of the mosques in and around Dushanbe, an activity he had started even before joining us. Also, his brother-in-law was a known commander of the Muslim troops.

The shroud of mystery surrounding Nurudin's death left us all guessing. The only thing confirmed was that he was killed for being identified as a Muslim activist but how much his death had to do with working for BIF, we could not tell. We were faced with a question: 'should we pull out of Tajikistan on the basis of our unconfirmed suspicions?' By the grace of Allah (swt), our work was directly saving lives in the TB hospital.

³ Calling towards Allah

We immediately froze all Dawah activities. Our staff of 9 people in Dushanbe included two foreigners so we had reasons to be worried.

Our CEO traveled to the area and told both Basheer and Dr. Islam that they could leave if they wanted to. Both refused saying that we need not worry since we were no longer involved with Dawah and the relief services being offered to Dushanbe were badly needed. Soon a contract was signed between BIF and the Ministry of Health, finalizing the administration of the TB hospital. With all Dawah activities frozen and only relief projects remaining, we reasoned that the anti-Islamic elements—if indeed they were behind Nurudin’s death— would surely back off.

I arrived in Dushanbe for three weeks in September of 1998 to restructure the operations, gather information and personally evaluate the situation. Everything appeared under control.

Our office in Dushanbe faces the parliament building in the Independence Square. A statue of Firdousi, a famous Persian poet, stares down at the beautiful gardens lining the main street. In these gardens are small cafés where one can dine on a lunch of rice and Kabab⁴ on tables scattered under the tall trees. Basheer and I would walk down, have lunch and talk. Surrounded by the rustle of leaves in the autumn breeze, we would spend hours talking with the snow-capped Pamir Mountains in the background. These meetings are now memories to be cherished for the rest of my life. We talked about a lot of things: our time spent together in Afghanistan, our families, BIF, the political situation and our plans for the future. I was amused with Basheer’s accounts of adjusting with his in-laws and how they were adjusting to him as a foreigner. They were impressed with his honesty and commitment to a cause. He was investing a great deal of time with Sadbarg and was very proud that she was quickly picking up Islamic knowledge.

In one such meeting I asked him why he didn’t leave Tajikistan after the death of Nurudin. “My mother-in-law would be left alone.” He said. I smiled. We both knew that there was more to it. I was also his manager and he was aware that I could have asked him to leave. He was careful in wording his answer. “Look Suleman,” he was very serious and thoughtful, “ you know that I have given myself to this cause. I know that I am in Tajikistan for no other reason but for Allah (swt),”

⁴ Grilled meat

then he paused, “and if I were to die, I have the confidence of knowing that I shall be a Shaheed⁵.”

We visited the grave of Nurudin in Dushanbe. I fought tears as I read Fatiha⁶; the death of the Sahaba⁷ dying for Allah (swt) in far away lands came to my mind. ‘Nureddin’ I felt like saying softly, ‘you left too high a standard for us to follow.’ Little did I know that in a couple of months Basheer—then standing by my very side— would also be brought here.

Basheer was shot at point blank range. I can conjure an image of his assassin, most likely a local Tajik clad in a black suit—so common in Dushanbe—walking up to him as he stepped out of his home. Alone and unarmed, Basheer stood no chance and was hit a total of 7 times in the chest and the head. The \$600 in his pocket—a lot of money in poverty stricken Tajikistan—were not touched. I could envision the residents filing into the street on hearing the shots including Sadbarg and her mother.

Basheer was 34, at an age when most of us start thinking seriously about life. It would take us lifetimes to do what he did in his last 12 years.

For Sadbarg—who had lost her father when young—he would be a dream forever: a young handsome man who came from continents away to struggle along her people; who married her; led her closer to Allah (swt); gave her joy and walked out of her home one fine morning never to return.

For us he was and will remain an inspiration, a statement that this world is worthless in front of the hereafter and if it takes our lives to establish Islam, then so be it. While we talk, write and lecture about sacrificing for Allah (swt) and Islam, Basheer lived it and etched it in history with his blood. He was a true embodiment of the statement that ‘a faith not worth dying for is not worth living for.’

He leaves behind in his legacy one more reason for us to struggle for the dream both he and Nurudin gave their lives for—to return Muslims to the arms of Islam from the torturous clutches of Colonialism and Communism.

⁵ One who dies for the cause of Islam

⁶ A chapter from the Quran

Basheer, may Allah accept your shahada⁸. (Ameen)

⁷ Companions of the Prophet Mohammed (sas)

⁸ Death for the cause of Islam