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## How a massacre killed an Afghan family's hope

By Katherine Haddon and Mushtaq Mojaddidi

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Tarana dressed up for the holiday in a specially tailored bright green robe, a 12-year-old Afghan girl excited to set off with her family for a religious festival that a decade of war had so far spared.



Twelve-year-old Tarana Akbari (C) stands among the bodies of dead and injured relatives

after a bomb attack on a shrine in Kabul during the Shiite holy day of Ashura on December 6, 2011. The attack ripped apart the lives of Tarana's family and scores of others and the image of her covered in blood came for many to symbolise Afghanistan's violent present and its uncertain future. AFP

After a suicide bomber ripped apart the lives of Tarana's family and scores of others, the image of her standing horrified in the blood-stained outfit came for many to symbolise Afghanistan's violent present and its uncertain future.

"Suddenly there was an explosion. It was as if the world had overturned, as if all the walls had collapsed on me," Tarana Akbari told AFP, surrounded by tearful relatives.

"When I could stand up, I saw that everybody was around me on the ground, really bloody. I was really, really scared," said the girl, whose name means "melody" in English.

Out of 17 women and children from her family who went to a riverside shrine in Kabul a week ago to mark the Shiite holy day of Ashura, seven died including her seven-year-old brother Shoaib.

At least 80 people lost their lives in all, and at least nine other members of Tarana's family were wounded.

Like millions of people in Afghanistan, the family lives hand to mouth in a mud-brick house, struggling to survive in a country ripped asunder by decades of conflict.

During Tarana's young life, an insurgency against US-led troops has grimly escalated as the Taliban battle to regain their lost power.

Refugees to Pakistan during the darkest days of the 1992-96 civil war that turned Kabul into a battlefield, the family returned in 2002, full of hope for peace and prosperity after a US-led invasion brought down the Taliban.

That hope has slowly ebbed away since, eroded by the insurgency and the lack of progress under a government led by President Hamid Karzai that stands accused of gross corruption and cronyism.

Their dreams finally disintegrated on December 6 when the Islamist insurgency destroyed a family that had never imagined it would die for its faith, the minority branch of Islam in a nation that is 80-percent Sunni.

"I have a broken heart now -- the family won't be able to gather together again and that's a really sad feeling," Tarana's mother, 30-year-old Bibi Hava, said at their two-room house, which is shared between seven people.

"I hate this country, because everybody just dies."

Tarana's scream was captured by AFP photographer Massoud Hossaini, another Shiite whose family are wearily familiar with exile. He had already seen her in the crowd and been struck by the vibrancy of her outfit earlier that day.

A week later, Tarana's family are mourning their dead.

Relatives gathered at their modest homes, clustered together around a small, muddy yard in the poor neighbourhood of Murad Khani, where the stench of open sewers laces the winter air and children scamper among piles of rubbish.

Tarana likes to play hide and seek, and marbles. But for now, she nestles under a thick blanket at home, where a small electric heater is the only source of warmth, her sad, brown eyes peeking over the top.

She spent three days in hospital. She has bandages on her legs, and limps when she tries to walk.

Bibi Hava's two other daughters, Sunita, 15, and Sweeta, four, are still in hospital. She herself has ball-bearings from the bomb lodged in her neck and arm, and is badly bruised.

Her anguish over the death of her son Shoaib, Tarana's little brother, is still raw.

"I will never see my child again. He used to walk in here for his breakfast and go out with his father to work," Bibi Hava said. "This morning I woke up and saw he wasn't there, and I just cried."

Dressed in black velour mourning with gold bracelets around her wrists, Bibi Hava looks far older than her 30 years as she describes what happened the moment the suicide bomber struck.

She blacked out briefly, but as she came around, she realised she was surrounded by people covered in blood.

"Little by little, I started to recognise my relatives," she said, welling up. "I screamed and I was watching as they died."

The extended family lives communally -- a common arrangement in Afghanistan, particularly in neighbourhoods like theirs, which is impoverished even by the standards of one of the least developed countries on Earth.

The family's roots in the area are deep and strong, which members said makes it even harder to accept such a huge loss of life so close to home.

Other children of the family who died were Tarana's nine-year-old cousin Abbas and two small boys -- Hassan, three, and Sohail, four -- who were related to Tarana on her mother's side.

Tarana has clear memories of that day and the nightmares still haunt her.

She woke up proud and happy. She dressed up in the eye-catching, specially made robe in green, a holy colour in Islam, and white trousers to mark Ashura -- a sacrosanct day in the Shiite calendar.

Her mother explained that the women and children walked to the shrine after a special meal, to watch menfolk beat themselves with chains to mourn the seventh-century killing of Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed.

They took the men fresh clothes to change into since their torsos would be covered in blood after beating themselves into a state of religious fervour.

But the blood that day would pour from the young and old, male and female alike, as an unprecedented act of mass murder struck the Shiite community in a country that, for all its pain, had been free of this kind of sectarian terror.

Like many residents of Murad Khani, the oldest part of the Afghan capital, Tarana's family has been in the neighbourhood for centuries.

But in 1992, when civil war broke out after the collapse of Afghanistan's Soviet-backed regime, they fled to the Pakistani city of Peshawar.

"We left because of the civil war and poverty and bad living conditions. We didn't have money to buy firewood and coal so we moved to Peshawar," said Tarana's father, Ahmad Shah Akbari.

When the Taliban came to power in 1996, the family stayed on in Pakistan. As Shiites, they feared oppression under the Taliban, Sunni Muslims notorious for their hardline zealotry.

They decided to come home after the defeat of the Taliban in the hope that a brighter day had come at last.

"We thought things had improved with the fall of the Taliban," said Akbari. "We thought our country is being rebuilt and there will be no war and fighting."

But years later, 140,000 foreign troops are still fighting the Taliban and living standards in Murad Khani, on the banks of the dried-out, rubbish-strewn Kabul river, remain primitive.

Roads are made of mud and heavily rutted. Open sewers are carved down the middle of several streets, with waste pipes feeding in from homes on either side.

Children do not always go to school. They fill up plastic containers at water pumps to take home to their families.

Many of Tarana's neighbours are, like her 37-year-old father, street vendors selling goods like fruit, vegetables and nuts to eke out a meagre existence.

Family ties are strong. As Tarana and Bibi Hava recall the horror of that day, uncles, aunts and cousins from around the courtyard arrive to listen and offer support with hugs, tea and food.

One relative is Feroz Khan Akbari, an uncle of Tarana seized by despair after the suicide bomber killed his nine-year-old son Abbas.

A keen body builder, he shows a photograph of his son which he kisses after talking about how close they were, and how he loved taking his boy with him to the gym.

"Nothing matters now. I really want another suicide attack to just come and finish this life," said the 27-year-old, who spends winters in Pakistan as a means of earning enough money to feed his family.

In the summer months in Kabul, Feroz sells chicken soup. In the winter in Peshawar, he sells balloons.

Perceptions of security have plummeted in Kabul this year as NATO-led combat troops, most of them from the United States, start a phased exit across Afghanistan that will culminate with the last withdrawals in 2014.

Feroz said he had taken his family to Pakistan temporarily, fearing that suicide attackers would strike during Ashura. But his little boy, Abbas, was so desperate to return that he later relented.

It is a decision that he will regret forever.

"He brought his family back just because his son insisted on spending Ashura here and his son was killed," said Ahmad Shah Akbari, his brother.

Barely literate and poorly educated, the family speak little about the US presence and sectarian divides between Shiite and Sunni in Afghanistan, which until now have caused little violence.

Unlike Afghan officials who are worried the blast could provoke an increase in sectarian violence, they blame nobody for the attack except those insurgents who have vowed to wage their campaign until all foreign forces leave.

"They kill innocent people to give the United States and Afghan governments a bad name. The situation is not under control," said Feroz.

While the women in the family cry over their loss, the men speak graphically of revenge.

Tarana's great-aunt Malalai, 45, was also killed. So was Malalai's daughter, Nazira, 30, and another of Tarana's great-aunts, 65-year-old Nasreen.

Malalai's son Zabi Azimi has a pregnant wife who is due to give birth in a month. She was badly injured, although her unborn baby is safe. Their other children were wounded.

"If I find the people who were behind this, I will butcher them like animals because they killed my family like that," said Zabi, a 27-year-old cook.

Feroz and Zabi both believe the bomber was from Pakistan, but have no theories about which group he might belong to, or why he targeted Shiites.

Karzai has blamed Pakistani killers from the Al-Qaeda-linked sectarian group Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, and insisted on action from Islamabad. Pakistan has demanded that Kabul provide hard evidence.

Tarana's family show no bitterness towards Sunnis.

"Real Muslims would never do this, not Sunni, not Shiite," said Zabi.

"God knows what the suicide attacker wanted. People there were mostly children, women, innocent people. They never had anything to do with politics, war or anything."

Tarana's beautiful green outfit was ruined by blood stains.

But little by little, she may start to look to the future again. Her ambition is to become a teacher - an ambition she could never have fulfilled under the Taliban, who banned girls from going to school.

Her grieving father is proud that she is fourth out of her class of 30, but desperately worried about the future.

"When we see the situation in our country, my heart is broken and I am very, very frustrated living here," Akbari said.

"My children became the victims of a suicide attack. If committing suicide were allowed in Islam, I would commit suicide now. Is this a life?"