

Afghanistan, An Eye Witness Account

By Stefan Smith, War Child

A girl at the back of the bombed-out classroom was busy examining her newly fitted artificial leg. One boy had lost his right hand and left eye and was showing a dummy landmine to his classmates. Today they were learning about the dangers of mines. Scanning the classroom in the devastated old city of Kabul, Afghanistan, it seemed to me that the mine-awareness teachers were preaching to children already so familiar with living in the heaviest mined city in the world.

Amputees are a common sight in Afghanistan, where every day four children under the age of sixteen are killed by landmines, and another four are seriously injured.

But statistics are just numbers, and, to me, meaningless. If the world could have seen that classroom that day, few people would not have been moved. When a teacher asked all the children in the classroom who had had a member of their family injured by a mine to raise their hands, all but one of the children did so. One young tearful girl did not. I learned later that her entire family had been killed. Her mother, father and two brothers were attempting to break up an anti-tank mine to sell as scrap metal when it exploded.

I took some photographs and left the school, walking home through the once bustling streets of Kabul's old city, a scene that now bears a striking resemblance to Sarajevo, Vukovar or Mostar. Once part of the staple diet of a Cold War hungry media in the 1980s, Afghanistan's continued Civil War has deemed it unworthy of the world's attention.

All around me, rubble bearing the seeds of many failed armies: landmines, unexploded mortars and bombs lay everywhere. The most alarming sight was the sheer number of children scouring the wrecked buildings, trying to gather scrap metal to sell to dealers. This deadly game of Russian roulette, where avoiding death or injury depends on luck, is being played out by thousands of children daily. When several kilos of scrap metal can buy a family food for a day, they accept the risk of death or severe injury.

When I think of Afghanistan now there are no romantic visions of a fiercely proud nation, the mysterious Khyber Pass or the historic defeats of the British Empire or the Soviet Union. The images that remain are of children clearing mines an arm and leg at a time, without limbs, without hope and without a future.

Had the land mines of Afghanistan been the machetes of Rwanda or the Serb snipers over Sarajevo, then perhaps the present long, drawn-out genocide would have spurred the world into action to help the innocent civilians of this country. But as it stands, the country faces a very bleak future. Until the world's attention shifts to those living with the daily horror of land mines, then places like Afghanistan will continue to suffer a slow and undignified collapse into anarchy and mutilation.

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