

Born Into Carnage, 18 Afghan Babies Face an Uncertain Fate

A day after gunmen stormed a maternity ward and slaughtered new mothers at random, the authorities struggled to reconnect their children with families.

By Mujib Mashal Photographs by Jim Huylebroek

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KABUL, Afghanistan — When the carnage was over, the dead bodies bagged and the guns put away, what was left behind spoke of the true extent of the tragedy: 18 newborn babies, many covered in blood and most now motherless — casualties of war before they had even left the hospital.

Even for a country steeped in violent death to the point of numbness, the assault on a maternity clinic in Kabul on Tuesday was unfathomable in its cruelty.

Afghanistan is adept at the rituals of violent death. There are procedures for handling the victims, and even well-practiced routines for discarding the remains of the suicide bombers who come to kill and be killed.

But what do you do with so many babies, all too similar in their little shapes and raw faces, most of them now without the first people in their lives and evacuated from a blown-up hospital?



The children were transferred to another hospital after the attack.

The oldest, born five days earlier, and the youngest, delivered in a safe room after the attack had begun, are lucky: Their mothers survived. Many of the others have barely completed a full 24 hours in this violent world, their mothers murdered next to them.

It was about now that a U.S. peace deal with the Taliban signed in February was supposed to reduce the bloodshed, and bring children like these hope that a war that has stretched over four decades in some shape or another might finally come to an end. But the deal seems stuck over a prisoner exchange that is moving at snail's pace, and the insurgents have ramped up attacks across the country, killing dozens by the day.

No one has claimed responsibility for the hospital attack.

The assault has the hallmarks of the Islamic State, which in the past has gone after "soft" civilian targets in the largely Shiite neighborhood that is home to the clinic.



Nurses outside the Ataturk hospital, where the newborns were taken.

But across Afghanistan, anger was boiling at the Taliban, who are refusing to agree to a cease-fire, and by extension creating space for other terrorist groups to exploit the increasingly blurred lines of the conflict. The situation is made worse by the country's political leaders, who are embroiled in messy infighting in the aftermath of a disputed election.

The heart-wrenching effort to identify the babies at the maternity clinic and reunite them with their families began in the immediate hours after the attack, before the special forces had even left the scene.

Dozens of men gathered around as a community elder emerged from a hospital that was still drenched in blood with a list of mothers' names. The babies themselves had not yet been named.

In Afghanistan, a conservative, male-dominated society, men take offense at the mere mention of their wives' names in public. It is extremely rare — and arduous — for a woman to make legal decisions for her child in the absence of a man. But now, for once, the men in the crowd outside the hospital listened intently as the babies were identified by their mothers' names.

"The child of Suraya!" the community elder shouted. "The child of Suraya — she was healthy, I myself helped load it into the ambulance."

"The child of Gul Makai — evacuated to the Ataturk hospital," he shouted.

At the Ataturk hospital the next morning, the two children were next to each other in incubators in the ward where all 18 babies had been transferred. But Suraya Ibrahim was dead, already buried. Gul Makai was there next to her child, limping with a leg wound.

This was Suraya Ibrahim's fifth child. The 31-year-old had been an army officer for several years, said a relative who had found her way to the baby's bed. Her military ID said she was a sergeant at the headquarters of the Ministry of Defense, part of the regiment providing security and support to the headquarters.



A relative of Suraya Ibrahim, who died in the attack, helped look after some of the rescued newborns.

Gul Makai, 35, is a housewife, married to a taxi driver. Her seventh child was born with breathing problems, so they had remained at the hospital for five days.

When the attack began, she said, she and the two other mothers in her room faced a dilemma: Should they try to escape and leave their babies behind? Or should they stay?

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The women were all on their own, no family at their side. The spread of Covid-19 had forced the hospital to stop even husbands from accompanying their wives, Zahra Jafari, a midwife working there, said.

The other two mothers stayed, and were most likely dead, she said — she had not seen them. Gul Makai left her baby, rushed to the hallway, jumped out, and was evacuated through one of the back doors.

On the street, she didn't know what to do. She had no phone, and she knew no phone numbers. Outside another gate, on the opposite end of the hospital, her husband, Azizullah, was standing with a change of clothes he had brought her when the attack had begun. They had no word of each other.

Gul Makai stopped a motorcycle, told the man what had happened, and pleaded with him to take her to her home. From home, she called Azizullah to tell him she was safe.

But the baby.

Azizullah stayed outside the hospital walls along with the dozens of other fathers and brothers searching for news, waiting for the military operation to be over.



Gul Makai with her child.

For several hours, Gul Makai had no news of her child. And all those hours? “I just wailed,” she said.

When the community elder reading the list outside the attacked hospital announced that “the child of Gul Makai” had been taken to Ataturk hospital, Azizullah rushed there and called his wife to come over, so she could identify the baby.

There he was, in a little shirt with pink sleeves and yellow cartoons on its chest: the “child of Gul Makai.”

Outside the ward on Wednesday morning, in the hospital yard, Azizullah — a small man with honest eyes and short beard under his mask — paced with other fathers, grandfathers, aunts and uncles. They had brought the documents needed to pick up the babies, as they were told: national IDs of the father or mother, the signature of the local community elder.

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Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

But the doctors and the officials from the health ministry were in meetings.

An hour passed, then two, then three. It started drizzling.

The family members outside — some who had just come from burying the dead mothers — grew restless, frustrated. The doctors kept saying they were waiting for the babies' files to arrive from the ruins of the other hospital, to make sure they did not make mistakes.



Azizullah, center, waiting before being allowed to pick up his baby.

It wasn't just the running from door to door, waiting for meetings to finish, that was driving the family members mad. There was also the swarm of strangers — women, and some men — who had arrived at the hospital.

Some had come out of solidarity. Among them were two women, one a doctor and an employee of a development organization, who had come the night before to breastfeed the babies; one stayed late into the night. Others also kept coming and offering to help.

But then there were the dozens and dozens of other women who had arrived with another agenda: adoption. In a bizarre, dystopian scene, they kept going around and asking if someone would give them a baby.

Ghulam Sakhi, who had buried his daughter the night before and was here to pick up his grandchild, was approached by women asking for babies so many times that he blew up and started screaming.



Ghulam Sakhi, second from right, listening as a hospital staff member explained why families had to wait to pick up the babies.

"Have some fear of the lord, some shame, people!" he said. "Are you human or not? It's not like their entire families drowned in the waters of Turkey and Greece and the children have no one left. It's not like their entire families were slaughtered that you want to take their children."

Finally, by early afternoon after much emotion and near-fistfights, the hospital began discharging the babies, one by one. By the end of the day, the identities of 11 were confirmed and handed to their families. The rest remained for another day.

For some, it was relatively easy once the process finally got underway. Azizullah pulled up his Toyota Corolla and Gul Makai limped into the back seat. A younger female relative carried the baby.

Azizullah choked up.

"Not just my wife," he said, his eyes welling with tears as he described Gul Makai: a hero.



Azizullah, Gul Makai and their newborn leaving the Ataturk hospital.

Others left with only raw pain.

A young woman, in her 20s, wept in the hallway outside the ward. She was there to collect her sister's child, she said. The sister was dead, and her husband was in the army serving on the front lines of the war in Ghazni Province.

No matter how much she begged, the doctors said that what she wanted was simply not possible. One hospital official blocked the door to the ward.

"Go bring a man," he said.



A young woman weeping at the hospital after being told she could not pick up her dead sister's child.

Fatima Faizi and Fahim Abed contributed reporting.