

# THE MORNING CALL

## Civilian casualties hurt mission in Afghanistan

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The handsome young man in the hospital bed in Kabul, Afghanistan, manages a weak smile but it makes the surgical tape around his neck tighten against his wound and the smile vanishes. On a chair next to the bed, his mother rocks back and forth, repeating over and over an incantation to Allah for her son's recovery. The ICU at the CURE hospital in Kabul, one of the few intensive care facilities in Afghanistan, is full of sad stories, few more tragic than that of Nasrat-ullah.

On March 4, Nasrat, age 16, was riding a bus on his way to school in the town of Jalalabad. Near the Spin Pul Bridge on Torkham Road, the bus pulled over to make way for a convoy carrying an elite unit of U.S. Marines. Eager to get to school, Nasrat recalled later that he paid little attention as the Humvees rumbled by. The troops, however, were on high alert; bridges provide preferred locations for terrorists.

What happened next depends on whom you talk to. Based on the original report from Afghanistan NGO Safety Office and news reports, there is little doubt that a minivan packed with explosives detonated next to the convoy. According to the Marines, the convoy also was fired upon by enemy snipers. The Marines began firing, spraying bullets into the morning crowd of Afghans on their way to work and school. As Nasrat ducked down in his seat, he felt a burning sensation go through his neck. It was the last voluntary movement Nasrat ever made. A small arms round severed his spinal cord.

Nasrat spent the first week in the U.S. hospital at Bagram Air Base. Once his condition stabilized, he was transferred to CURE in Kabul. There, a diagnosis of permanent paralysis from the neck down was confirmed. To look at him, you might think he had been admitted for the flu or an appendectomy; there is not a mark on him, except for one, small, perfectly round hole hidden beneath a bandage.

Jim Kline, director of CURE, approaches Nasrat's father, Zia- Udin. In quiet tones, Kline explains in English that Nasrat is a quadriplegic as the result of the incident involving the U.S. Marines. An interpreter stares back at Kline, as though begging to not have to be the bearer of such news. At first there is no visible reaction except the emergence of a piece of paper from Zia-Udin's pocket. "Look, these are his grades from school. He is a smart boy. He does very well with computers. He has a good future."

"We'll do everything we can," says Kline. As reality hits, shock turns to anger. Zia-Udin shakes his fist, "The people who did this are the enemies of Afghanistan. They are outsiders who do not want to build Afghanistan."

Zia-udin is not alone in those feelings. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has condemned this and other incidents, pleading with the United States to not further inflame the situation. Civilian casualties have

increasingly been responsible for Karzai's plummeting popularity and growing feeling of frustration among the population with the presence of U.S. and NATO forces.

Last month, another incident involving civilian casualties occurred in Nangahar Province. According to the Associated Press, as many as six Afghans, including a woman and a teenage girl, were killed in a U.S.-led raid against a suspected terrorist compound. Bomb-making equipment was found and four were arrested. Civilians, angry at the deaths of those they say were not terrorists, felled trees to create barriers, then laid out the bodies of the dead, blocking the same road where Nasrat had been injured.

The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission has accused the Marine Special Forces unit involved in the March 4 incident with using excessive force. The U.S. military has referred the case for criminal inquiry and the 120-member Marine unit has been removed from Afghanistan.

In a war where the enemy values neither their own lives nor those of their countrymen; where attacks are planned and executed in the midst of a quiet weekday morning, whom should Zia-Udin blame for the loss of his son's future? The men who shot him or the men who caused him to be shot?

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