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The Child Who Knows Too Much About Cruelty in this World

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Featured image: Yvonne Ridley [right] with Mohammed Shofique, 11 year old Rohingya refugee currently residing at the Thainkhali Camp in Bangladesh

Millions of children around the world will wake up on Christmas Day and rip open their presents and parcels with an enthusiasm that only a child can display. The sparkle in their eyes will speak volumes to their parents and family. It's an expression of undiluted happiness repeated across the Muslim world at the time of Eid. Even a humble date or the smallest act of kindness can bring joy to a child's face.

I genuinely don't know, though, if **Mohammed Shofique** will ever smile again after being exposed to a wickedness and evil that nobody, especially a child, should ever experience. The 11-year-old gave me a glimpse of his wretched world, and as I looked into his deep, brown eyes he shared with me a story of horror and pain which will remain with me forever.

In all my years as a journalist walking through the killing fields of Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Pakistan, to name but a few, I have never experienced a story like the one young Rohingya Mohammed shared with me.

The little boy spoke in a slow, deliberate monotone. He had a story to tell, but in a camp of more than 670,000 refugees, it is difficult for anyone, let alone a child, to have his voice heard. I am blessed to have been given this opportunity not only to hear what he had to say, but also to listen.

As we talked through a translator, someone asked me if I had sought his parent's permission to speak to him. It was a well-meaning intervention; I shook my head, and could barely respond, because Mohammed no longer has any parents. They were slaughtered along with most of his family in an orgy of killing by the monsters of Myanmar who tore through his village in Tulatuli, Maungdaw, with their guns, machetes and swords.

His home is now a small room of plastic and bamboo pulled together in Thainkhali Camp, one of the many that stretches over a vast area in Bangladesh near the Myanmar border. It is a far cry from the home that he shared with his father **Noor Islam**, 42, and his mother **Hamida Khatu**, 35, his five brothers and his sister **Taslima**.

> "I can't remember the date or the day it happened," he told me, but it was morning, maybe around 9am.

He remembers fleeing from his home with the rest of his family as the brutal Myanmar

forces fired randomly at anything and everything that moved in Tulatuli. The attack was sudden and unexpected.

Mohammed's mother pushed 15 month old **Arkan Ulla** into his brother's arms and as they ran for their lives they were separated from the rest of the family. They ended up being corralled in a field by the soldiers, along with many other villagers. As the boy stood there bewildered, hugging his little brother, gunfire crackled through the air and a number of men standing nearby fell to the ground.

> "Among those who fell I recognised two of my uncles, Mohamed and Abdul Malik," he told me.

I asked him if he could remember anything else and he told me how a "pious, religious old man" had stood fearlessly as the carnage was played out in the field.

> "The soldiers pointed their guns at him and the triggers jammed. They couldn't shoot him and it was as though something was protecting him. The soldiers got angry and one went up with a long sword and cut him down."

He died, added the boy in a monotone.

Mohammed didn't fidget while he spoke to me, as children often do; he stood there, rigid, as if still in shock, while more horrifying details poured from his mouth. It was as though he needed to download the memories of that awful day, relieved to share the burden.

And what a burden. Every time I think of this child my eyes fill with tears. If you can empathise, yours will too, for the horror of that day had only just begun.

As the soldiers set about their carnage in this tiny village, they plumbed to the depths of cruelty and depravity which is beyond our understanding. As they separated the villagers into three groups, Mohammed glimpsed his mother in the crowd. She reached out and took Arkan Ulla from him and handed the toddler to his sister. They were then led away. He would not see his siblings again.

Another group, including himself, his mother and his aunty, were pushed into a house. Once inside, a soldier held a gun to his mother's head and demanded money and jewellery. She had neither, and told him so. The man became angry, and began beating Mohammed in front of her with a stick.

> "I was beaten hard on the left side of my head," the boy explained, "and then another soldier lifted a big knife and brought the blade down on my head." The blow not only split Mohammed's scalp open but it was so forceful that he was also knocked unconscious. "I must have been left alone after that because I think everyone thought I was dead."

When he regained consciousness the soldiers had gone. Any relief he might have felt disappeared immediately as he surveyed the scene in what had become a house of horrors. What he saw will haunt him for the rest of his days.

> “My mother was lying on the ground and I went to her but she was not moving. Her throat had been cut open. I looked around again and realised that I was the only one left alive.”

Bewildered and in shock — and deaf in one ear, presumably from the beating — the boy ran from the house when he realised it was on fire. As the flames ripped through the building, Mohammed ran towards nearby paddy fields and hid there until the following morning.

The village was smouldering and the unmistakable smell of dead and burning bodies filled the air. He saw corpses strewn at every turn, lying in pools of congealed blood. Alone and afraid, he followed a stream until he arrived at the village of Wykum.

Among the survivors he found there Mohammed looked for any familiar faces, but there were none. He spent the first four days and four nights alone and terrified, wondering what his fate would be. A small glimmer of hope presented itself when he saw a group of other Muslims and felt safe to join them.

Two days later he was in Bangladesh and in safe hands. Doctors treated his head wound and six stitches were inserted. He showed me the scar on his scalp; not in the proud, boastful way that young boys tend to show off their wounds, but in a shy, almost reserved manner; he *needed* me to see his scar and feel the ridge on his crown. He bowed down and showed me where the blade had ripped open his flesh.

That is the physical scar; it was easy to see and feel. What, though, about the psychological scars deep in this child’s soul? That’s what worries me. Expressionless throughout the telling of his compelling story, he narrated it in a dry, clinical fashion, unchanging in pitch and without any intonation.

By chance, an uncle spotted him with the other orphan children and took him to a room where he was reunited with his grandmother; to his amazement, there in the room was his younger brother Rowzi Ulla. The seven-year-old has lived in a silent world after illness left him deaf and without speech as a toddler.

> “When I saw Rowzi I ran towards him and cried,” Mohammed recalled. “He cried and we hugged and we both cried together. We thought that we were alone in the world but now we have each other.”

Even this happy event is delivered in the same dull monotone.

When I asked what he wants to do in the future, Mohammed looked at me with his deep brown eyes:

> “I don’t know what I want. I only have a brother. Sometimes I think I would be better if I died with my family and other times I thank God I’m still alive.”

Coming from an 11-year-old, this is hard to take.

He paused momentarily.

> "The bad people should be punished for what they have done to me and everyone else," he added deliberately.

There was no anger in his voice, no faltering or stuttering words. Not even any emotion; that was left for me to supply.

I made Mohammed a promise. I said that we would do our best to find the bad men who did such bad things to him, his family and the people in his village.

No child should have to experience what he has gone through. Equally, no one reading Mohamed's story should rest until the wickedness that visited his village that day is dealt with in a court of law.

While the UN dithers and international politics are being played by powerful people in powerful places, we should take a moment to remember Mohammed and what he has gone through. We should then make every effort to see that justice is done for him and all the other Mohammeds whose individual stories are never going to be told. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have experienced horrors beyond human comprehension. The pain and suffering experienced by the Rohingya people will never go away, but it is our duty to see that justice is delivered on their behalf.

War crimes have been committed on an industrial scale by a ruthless military holding sway in Myanmar, assisted by some Buddhist monks and local police officers. We are now beginning to build up a picture of what happened in villages like Tulatuli; more importantly, the names and identities of those responsible for such atrocities are beginning to emerge. That is why I am able to send this message to the monsters of Myanmar: we know who you are, and we are coming for you.

Yvonne Ridley *is working with an all-woman team of lawyers from Protect the Rohingya based in Johannesburg, South Africa. In the first initiative of its kind, statements from the refugees are being taken and evidence of war crimes is now beginning to mount against the Myanmar regime.*

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