

Tuesday, May 9, 2008

Witness to a Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan



(Photo: Stephen Dupont/Contact Press Images)

Two days after the April 27 assassination attempt on President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, the photojournalist Stephen Dupont and the writer Paul Rafael, both Australian, were traveling with an opium eradication team in eastern Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province when a suicide bomber attacked their convoy. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, which killed at least 15 and wounded 14. Both journalists were among the injured; Mr. Dupont suffered minor injuries to his head, and Mr. Rafael serious ones.

Afghanistan is again expected to have a bumper poppy crop this year, and Afghan eradication teams like the one they were traveling with have come under increasing attack from the Taliban or other armed groups, who use the profits from the opium trade to fuel the insurgency against American and NATO forces. The following is an account of the attack by Mr. Dupont, who was working for Contact Press Images and on assignment for Smithsonian magazine, at the time. You can view a slide show of images taken by Mr. Dupont before and after the attack.

That morning we set off from Jalalabad in a convoy of about eight vehicles, green Ford pickups and one small truck with 50 to 60 laborers. About 40 minutes later we came to a small town, Khogyani. The truck in front of us pulled up to the gate of a police barracks. We were at the edge of the town, the police buildings facing fields in a desert valley below.

We stopped. The driver and the commanding officer got out, and everyone started jumping off the back of the flatbed, all the police meeting each other. Paul and I waited in the truck. We had the windows down and were smoking, talking, when I heard a huge bang. Then I saw black. I still don't know if it was smoke or if I actually blacked out.

When I could see again, I got out of the car and I ran. My instinct led me away. I heard gunfire. Some Afghans were running and I ran with them. We took cover behind a mound of dirt 30 or 40 yards away. Blood poured down my face. I didn't know how badly I was wounded, and I started asking people could they tell me if I was O.K.

Crouched with me was an Afghan cameraman and some police officers. Then I looked toward the vehicles, 20 yards from where the bomb had gone off, and I saw six or seven bodies. That's the first time I knew that people had been wounded or killed. I started to move toward the bodies, and then after 10 or 20 seconds, I thought, "Where's Paul?"

I headed back to our vehicle. Paul was still in his seat, his right side completely covered in blood, but he seemed coherent. I spoke to him, saying, "You're O.K.," and things like that. He didn't say anything. All around people were shredded like minced meat, mangled bodies missing heads, legs and arms. I didn't see many wounded. I remember one guy alive sitting among all these bodies. I think it made an impression just because he was alive in this mess. I started taking pictures. I felt I was taking pictures of evidence.

Eventually, the Americans, who were from the 173rd Airborne Brigade and incredibly hospitable, gave us a medevac flight to Bagram Air Base, outside Kabul. Paul is here, too. He's got five holes in the back of his head, two the size of golf balls. There's a bone fragment stuck inside one. They don't know if it's his or somebody else's. They think it may be pushing up against his brain, affecting his vision. I've talked to him and he seems O.K., except for the vision and not hearing from his right ear. They think he may have punctured his eardrum.

— STEPHEN DUPONT