

Balakot, Pakistan, A father holds his injured child as he surveys the damage to the devastated city of Balakot.

(Below) Fierce fighting in southern Afghanistan sent tens of thousands of people fleeing their homes, causing a wave of displacement



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# A JOURNEY *of unimaginable* EXPERIENCES

by Salma Zulfiqar

**I**t has been almost a decade since I took up my mission as a reporter/producer with the United Nations to highlight people's suffering around the world and I can safely say that these have been some of the most important years of my life. It has been a journey of unimaginable life changing experiences having covered several continents; South Asia, Africa and the Middle East. From poverty, conflict and famine, to natural disasters, women's rights and climate change, just some of the issues I've covered over the years.

My journey started in Pakistan, a fascinating nation but one which sadly continues to be plagued with poverty and political strife. I

landed on Pakistani soil in February 2001 with a suitcase in tow and a handful of numbers to call. This is where I joined the United Nations and covered some of the most harrowing stories. As a woman of Pakistani origin, I wanted to highlight the situation and plight of women in the country. I still have vivid memories of the young woman I found in the burns unit of the PIMS hospital in the capital, Islamabad. She had been there for several days when I met her and was wrapped in bandages from head to toe. Her skin was red and raw. Her husband had thrown acid on her, a horrific practice used to punish women. Sitting on the bed next to her was another woman who had been defaced. Her husband punished her by cutting off her nose because she had an argument with him.





These were typical cases I was told by the doctor showing me around the hospital ward and these were stories I heard from women in all provinces across the country during my stay in the country.

The country is also prone to natural disasters and experienced one of the most devastating earthquakes in its history. I visited the earth quake affected area in the north of the country after the disaster struck to report on the needs of displaced people. While filming a documentary on the aftermath in Balakot I came across an elderly man who had lost his entire family, 12 members in total including his grandchildren. He asked us why he was still alive.

*As I was about to leave the children refused to let us go and held us hostage for 4 hours demanding money*

Pakistan is also home to one of the largest Afghan refugees populations in the world. I remember walking through Jalozi camp in the North West Frontier Province, it was home to an estimated 80,000 Afghans in 2001. I reported on stories of refugee children dying from heat and diarrhea, I met people who simply didn't have enough food to eat and were surviving on bits of stale bread with no access to clean water and no proper sanitation. One thing always amazes me where ever I go; the hospitality of the poor. They always offer to share what ever little they have and the Afghans , who've endured decades of conflict, are no less when it comes to giving a warm welcome.

My first of many visits to neighbouring Afghanistan was one that I will never forget. I was travelling in a small cessna plane, carrying just a dozen people, from Islamabad to Mazar-e-Sharif in 2001 during the rule of the Taliban. The trip took place during the rainy season and shortly after take off we hit bad weather. The plane dipped so sharply that people began sweating and I began vomiting. I remember how the pilots were overcome with horror as they gripped on to the controls. We spent an hour circling and dipping and after almost an hour they managed to gain control and bring us all back to safety. Needless to say it took a lot of courage on my part to board the next flight into the country the following week.

A few years later I produced a documentary on the situation of women's rights, these were some of the most shocking images I had ever filmed. I remember the dead baby being born to a 23 year old in Faizabad hospital in northeastern Afghanistan. Gynecologists had to make a hole in the baby's head in order to get it out of the young woman's body. After the birth, one of the nurses pulled the under developed brain out of the babies head and thrust it in front of my face, telling me that this was something they experienced on a daily basis. (*Losing Hope: Women In Afghanistan* was screened at the Raindance Film Festival in London and The Burbank International Film Festival in Los Angeles).

Afghanistan is a difficult country to operate in , not only due to insecurity but also the fact that infrastructure is poor. A combination of the roads and extreme weather conditions pose huge challenges. The snowfall in Afghanistan is one of the heaviest I've ever seen. I remember traveling to a remote village in the north east of the country to film in a village where mothers were giving their children opium as a cure for common illnesses, such as a cold.

Afghanistan is the world's leading producer of opium and this was an

important story and so I wasn't deterred by the two-day car journey which involved driving along treacherous mountain roads. A few miles before we reached the village there was an avalanche and we had no choice but to climb over metres of snow with the equipment to get to the villagers. Once we got to the village we were faced with shocking images of mothers giving blowbacks of opium to children only a few months old. Illiteracy, lack of adequate health facilities and poverty has contributed to this practice.

Everywhere you go in the developing world, whether it is Pakistan, Afghanistan, Egypt, Kenya, Cameroon or Yemen you will be sure to see children working on the streets. Their clothes and their little fingers soiled as they bang on car windows to try and sell newspapers, sweets, packets of tissues and other bits and pieces. I often think about what they will be when they grow up...that's if they make it to adult hood. The plight of children in all of the countries has touched me so I also decided to dedicate sales of my paintings to raise funds for those who have no choice but to earn a living on the streets. I've been supporting a non-government organisation (NGO) in Afghanistan called Aschiana, which is educating street children and I have held exhibitions in Dubai, Kabul, London and Birmingham to raise awareness of their needs and to help provide funding for activities run by the NGO.

I spent the last few months of 2009 in Cameroon in Central Africa where I worked alongside the likes of UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and actress Mia Farrow to highlight the serious situation of malnutrition in the country. I met a mother who had a set of two-year old twins who could not walk because they were malnourished. UNICEF is supporting feeding centres across the country to help bring children back to good health and give them a brighter future, but the needs are great and so I continue my journey in the developing world to continue highlighting the needs of the poor.

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The most recent chapter of my journey brought me to Chad. My first few weeks there were marred by an unfortunate encounter with former child soldiers. I was at a centre where the former child soldiers were being rehabilitated, having left armed groups and laid down their weapons.

As I was about to leave the centre with a colleague and the children refused to let us go and held us hostage for 4 hours demanding money. Around 30/40 children formed a blockade in front of the gate.

While there was no violence involved, as darkness fell I began to wonder whether I would be spending the night at the centre. But after negotiations through police and community leaders, the children let us go. While this was a scary incident you can't help but feel sorry for these youngsters, some boys are as young as 10.

Some have been forced to take up arms, others do it for the money or for revenge in areas where conflict is taking place. It's a sad situation and the psychological toll on engaging in combat at such a young age can leave life long scars. **AW**



(Above) Pakistan, A young boy stands in line, sandwiched in a group of men waiting for handouts of clothing and food. With the death and injury of so many adults children are left with caring for families.

(Below) Refugees, wait for registration in a transition centre. For more than two decades Pakistan hosted the largest single refugee population in the world.

