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First Blood

The room was inadequately lit. It was the central portion of a long barrack divided by cardboard partitions into three parts. The partitions went only halfway from the floor to the roof. The only source of lighting was two unshaded bulbs hanging from the roof. The walls of the room were still adorned with gaudy paper flower strings and posters. There were cracks in the walls and the structure seemed unstable.

As I crossed the threshold of the room I could hear voices from the adjoining portion. The surgeon on duty told us to keep our voices low as the co-ordination conference for central relief operations was going on in that part. It was being headed by the top military man in the area and was attended by all the important men involved in the government's relief operation. The room smelled of hospital antiseptic, smoke from cigarettes and the smell of blood and putrefaction mixed with the chilled night air.

The first thing that caught my eye was the center of the room. It was occupied by four small tables combined together to produce a couch. They were partly covered with a dirty, blood stained plastic sheet. On the table was a blanket. On closer look I found a small child lying under the blanket. All I could see of him was a pale face with closed eyes, and an arm sticking out of the edge of the blanket. There was a stump covered with dressing where there should have been a hand. A man was sitting by the couch. He was a middle-aged man with a small graying beard. He was a picture of pain and suffering. There was hopelessness and helplessness in his eyes. He seemed to be grieving and yet appeared resigned to his fate.

I was told that the child was brought from a village in Jehlum valley. Four days back when the massive earthquake hit the area, the child was in his house. When everyone rushed outdoors to save himself or herself, the child's mother rushed in to save him. The house fell over them and she was killed instantly. The child survived but could be brought out of rubble only after three days. Since landslides inundated the road leading to the village, the father of the child had carried him in his arms for more than 20 miles to reach the base hospital in the city. When the surgeon saw the child, gangrene had already set in his injured hand and forearm. He was comatose and was in septicemia. The surgeon performed an emergency amputation of the hand under the dim light in that makeshift operation room. Since he had no scalpel, he used a simple blade to perform the operation without adequate general anesthesia. And since it was night, he had no means to evacuate the patient to a proper hospital, which was to be done the next day by helicopter.

It was in those gruesome surroundings that realization hit me straight on. I was standing in a place, which was probably going through the most difficult time in its known history.

The region lay devastated, humbled before the power of nature. Buildings were destroyed like houses of cards, people had died like ants and those who survived wished they were dead. The pain etched on the face of the desperate, helpless and yet in a very strange way dignified father, sitting by his injured and dying son who had little hope of surviving the night, was a picture I am probably not going to forget all my life.

Welcome to Muzaffarabad.