

Tomorrow never comes

ATLE HETLAND
EN ROUTE

A short story about the Army Public School in Peshawar and what happened on 16 December 2014 when happiness was turned into unimaginable tragedy.

Sheriyar celebrated his fifteenth birthday on Monday this week. All his cousins and his closest friends came, and his uncles and aunts too. His mother and sisters prepared it all. His father, a retired army officer now working in a private construction company, had come home from work early. The food was great and they all ate too much. Then the boys rushed out for a round of cricket on the street before sunset and load shedding. But it was all right to go in then since the day had been half overcast making it chilly, and it was a bit dusty before the winter rains.

Sheriyar's mother and sisters, along the other women and girls, had soft drinks and the birthday cake ready for the boys as they sat down in the sitting room. Life couldn't be more pleasant than this, they may have thought. Well, the boys didn't think about it, because this was just how it was on every birthday Sheriyar could remember – his birthdays and those of his three brothers and two sisters.

"I love you", he told his mother when it was all over. His mother smiled and asked if he and his friends had enjoyed themselves. "Yes, it couldn't have been better", he said. Then it was off to his room with his brothers so they could prepare their school bags for the next day. They were a bit tired but very happy. Tomorrow was going to be one of the last schooldays before their winter break.

"When will we go to Mardan on Friday?" he asked his father. "We go after *Juma Prayers*", his father replied, adding that Sheriyar would have to help him with some shopping beforehand. "We have to bring gifts for your cousins and your grandmother", he said. "No, problem", Sheriyar replied. He already knew what his cousin Alam wanted. They were the same age and he had told him last time they had visited. His father was happy with that. He smiled and bid good night.

The next morning was quite hectic in the house, as usual on schooldays. There were six children in different ages in the house. They all took quick cups of tea and *paratas* with omelet.

Sheriyar's mother and father looked at each other and smiled slightly, he noticed. His parents seemed so happy, he thought. And then it was into the car so his father would drop Sheriyar and his brother at the same school. His younger brother and two sisters could walk to their school just behind the house.

"Goodbye", they shouted as they left the house. It sounded almost like a quire. "When the school day is over, you must help clean the autumn leaves from under the big tree in the backyard", Sheriyar's mother reminded him and his brother.

It was a happy day, like every day. None of them could have known that in a few hours everything would change. Nothing would ever be the same.

As soon as Sheriyar's mother and father heard about the terrorist attack at Sheriyar's and his brother's school, they rushed there to ascertain that their children were safe. They were not allowed in. It was a total chaos of terrified children, desperate parents and other adults wanting outside. Finally Sheriyar's younger brother came out. He was alright but talking incomprehensibly. But where was Sheriyar? Nobody knew. Then a military man came with the sad message that all in the classroom where the 15-year old boys were had been shot by the

terrorists. They had been taken to the nearby hospital. The parents rushed there as fast as they could. Sheriyar was dead when they arrived, and also two of the other boys who had been in the birthday.

At that moment, the time stopped and reality was no more. Yesterday had been so beautiful, but now, there were no more tomorrows for Sheriyar, and also not for his mother and father, his brothers and sisters, his cousins and all the other relatives and friends. Everything had changed in the blink of an eye for Sheriyar's family – and for hundreds of families in Peshawar, for thousands of people, a whole nation and beyond.

Tuesday this week was a watershed in Peshawar's history. It was similar to '9/11', the tragedy in America in 2001, the Breivik extremist killings in Norway in 2011 – the terrorist attacks in Spain and London, a and another school attack in Yemen the same day.

Sheriyar's father had gone to a Catholic school in Murree before he joined the army. His old teacher, Father Hillary, came to the house in the afternoon. They belonged to different religions but that day they prayed together. Yet, prayers, sympathy, compassion and words seemed to be of little comfort.

"We may even be shattered in our faiths today, not knowing what to think, say, and do. We find no reason and justification for the mayhem", the priest said. "It was senseless and inexplicable and we feel like falling down a bottomless abyss."

"We know God is love", the priest continued. "But this tragedy is beyond comprehension. Sheriyar was a cheerful young boy with the whole life ahead of him. It is unbelievable that he will be gone forever. But he will always be with you in your hearts", the priest said, adding that when tragedies of this magnitude happen we should try even to forgive the perpetrators because they had gone astray.

"If the terrible terrorist attack was indeed carried out by Taliban, we must seek ways of talking with them in the future so that such things can never happen again. We must search for new paths so we can live peacefully together, with God's help. If we live by love, we shall see love. But if we live by the sword, we shall die by the sword", the priest said, stressing that the victims in Peshawar were all innocent students and teachers. They died to no fault of their own.

Father Hillary knew that his words didn't make much sense. He was as bewildered as the others. All were in pain and mourning, searching for explanations, but finding none, just feeling pain.

"Tomorrow will not be as we had planned, and yesterday will never come back. Let us ask for God Allah's help to go on. There is no other way", said Sheriyar's father, holding his arms around his five children left, and his wife next to him.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid.