

War is about the failure of the human spirit

A hospital of screaming wounded, floors covered with blood

It was a scene from the Crimean War; a hospital of screaming wounded and floors running with blood. I stepped in the stuff; it stuck to my shoes, to the clothes of all the doctors in the packed emergency room, it swamped the passageways and the blankets and sheets.

The Iraqi civilians and soldiers brought to the Adnan Khairallah Martyr Hospital in the last hours of Saddam Hussein's regime yesterday – sometimes still clinging to severed limbs – are the dark side of victory and defeat; final proof, like the dead who are buried within hours, that war is about the total failure of the human spirit. As I wandered amid the beds and the groaning men and women lying on them – Dante's visit to the circles of hell should have included these visions – the same old questions recurred. Was this for 11 September? For human rights? For weapons of mass destruction?

In a jammed corridor, I came across a middle-aged man on a soaked hospital trolley. He had a head wound which was almost indescribable. From his right eye socket hung a handkerchief that was streaming blood on to the floor. A little girl lay on a filthy bed, one leg broken, the other so badly gouged out by shrapnel during an American air attack that the only way doctors could prevent her moving it was to tie her foot to a rope weighed down with concrete blocks.

Her name was Rawa Sabri. And as I walked through this place of horror, the American shelling began to bracket the Tigris river outside, bringing back to the wounded the terror of death which they had suffered only hours before. The road bridge I had just crossed to reach the hospital came under fire and clouds of cordite smoke drifted over the medical centre. Tremendous explosions shook the wards and

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corridors as doctors pushed shrieking children away from the windows.

Florence Nightingale never reached this part of the old Ottoman Empire. But her equivalent is Dr Khaldoun al-Baeri, the director and chief surgeon, a gently-spoken man who has slept an hour a day for six days and who is trying to save the lives of more than a hundred souls a day with one generator and half his operating theatres out of use – you cannot carry patients in your arms to the 16th floor when they are coughing blood.

Dr Baeri speaks like a sleepwalker, trying to describe how difficult it is to stop a wounded man or woman from suffocating when they have been wounded in the thorax, explaining that after four operations to extract metal from the brains of his patients, he is almost too tired to think, let alone in English. As I leave him, he tells me that he does not know where his family is.

“Our house was hit and my neighbours sent a message to tell me they sent them away somewhere. I do not know where. I have two little girls, they are twins, and I told them they must be brave because their father had to work night and day at the hospital and they mustn’t cry because I have to work for humanity. And now I have no idea where they are.” Then Dr Baeri choked on his words and began to cry and could not say goodbye.

There was a man on the second floor with a fearful wound to the neck. It seemed the doctors could not staunch his blood and he was dribbling his life away all over the floor. Something wicked and sharp had cut into his stomach and six inches of bandages could not stop the blood from pumping out of him. His brother stood beside him and raised his hand to me and asked: “Why? Why?”

A small child with a drip-feed in its nose lay on a blanket. It had had to wait four days for an operation. Its eyes looked dead. I didn’t have the heart to ask its mother if this was a boy or a girl.

There was an air strike perhaps half a mile away and the hospital corridors echoed with the blast, long and low and powerful, and it was followed by a rising chorus of moans and cries from the children outside the wards. Below them, in that worst of all emergency rooms, they had brought in three men who had been burned across their faces and arms and chests and legs; naked men with a skin of blood and tissues whom the doctors pasted with white cream, who sat on their beds with their skinless arms held upwards, each beseeching a non-existing saviour to rescue him from his pain.

“No! No! No!” another young man screamed as doctors tried to cut open his pants. He shrieked and cried and whinnied like a horse. I thought he was a soldier. He looked tough and strong and well fed but now he was a child again and he cried: “Umma, Umma [Mummy, mummy]”.

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I left this awful hospital to find the American shells falling in the river outside. I noticed, too, some military tents on a small patch of grass near the hospital's administration building and – “God damn it,” I said under my breath – an armoured vehicle with a gun mounted on it, hidden under branches and foliage. It was only a few metres inside the hospital grounds. But the hospital was being used to conceal it. And I couldn't help noticing the name of the hospital. Adnan Khairallah had been President Saddam's minister of defence, a man who allegedly fell out with his leader and died in a helicopter crash whose cause was never explained.

Even in the last hours of the Battle of Baghdad, its victims had to lie in a building named in honour of a murdered man. ♦