

# Memoirs of Afghanistan

Rita Lasar

Rita Lasar's brother, Abe Zelmanowitz, was killed in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. She visited Afghanistan in January 2002, four months after the U.S. invasion, to meet with innocent families affected by the bombing.

## The Reality of War

As my plane approached the capital of Afghanistan, it seemed to me that I was landing on the surface of the moon. There appeared to be nothing but rubble and light brown dust as far as the eye could see. I did not believe that it was possible to feel more sadness and disorientation than I had been experiencing since my brother perished in the World Trade Center on September 11th. But in Afghanistan, I experienced the same shock as I had on that fateful day.

The drive to the city revealed more destruction and devastation than this privileged American had ever imagined. This was the reality of war.

## Witness

On the way to the city, our guide pointed to a collapsed building. He told me that it had been a mosque recently bombed by my country. I asked if we could stop the car. There before me was a sight



The food packets (left) are the same bright yellow color as the cluster bombs (right).

identical, except in size, to what I had seen at Ground Zero (the site where the World Trade Center stood) a few days earlier. The metal frame of the mosque was sticking out of the structure at the exact angle as the metal frame of the North Tower of the World Trade Center, the building my brother had died in.

It was then that I fully understood why I had chosen to make this journey. I was to be a witness to the sorrow, horror, and suffering of the innocent people who were being made to pay for the September 11th attacks.

We visited the Aschiana Streetchildren's Center, a humanitarian agency that took children off the streets, fed them a daily meal, and taught them arts and crafts so that they would not have to beg. The children were so beautiful and so sad. But they were also children, and so they laughed,



Rita Lasar participating in civil disobedience.



Rita visits the Shafer family in Kabul on January 15, 2002. Their home was destroyed by a U.S. bomb and a woman, six months pregnant, was severely wounded.

and sang, and gathered around to watch and to hear these strange Americans. After we had been there a few days, we were recognized wherever we went, and the children would call out to us, "Hello, how are you? We love you."

### Bombs Kill Innocent People

U.S. forces had dropped many cluster bombs in the military campaign in Afghanistan. Each contained 202 "bomblets" which explode separately. Up to 30% of the bomblets did not explode on impact, so they remained a danger to the population.

The bomblets were even more dangerous because they looked like the food packets that the U.S. had also dropped from the skies. Those running to get the food would sometimes be maimed or killed when they picked up a bomblet by mistake. A doctor told us that his hospital treated at least ten children a day who were harmed by the bomblets.

I met the brothers of a young man who had been asleep with his recent bride in their bed when a bomb came through the window and killed them both. They told me about their brother: "He was an artist and a poet and had married a young woman very much like him." We sat on a carpet on the floor, drinking tea, and eating nuts and raisins brought by their sister, who handed me an



On March 17, 2003, Rita Lasar was arrested, along with many others, in front of the Capitol building in Washington, DC. They were protesting the Iraq War, which started two days later.

embroidered parrot that her brother had made. She said how sorry she was for my brother, and we embraced and cried together.

My trip to Afghanistan changed my life. Never will I be able to turn my eyes or back away from the innocent victims of governments unable to resolve conflict through means other than bombs: bombs that kill innocent people, just like my brother Avrame.

*Rita Lasar is a member of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows. This article was excerpted from September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows: Turning Our Grief Into Action for Peace.*



## Letter to the New York Times

September 17, 2001

To the Editor:

My brother, Abe Zelmanowitz, was on the 27th floor of 1 World Trade Center when the first plane hit. Although he could have gotten out of the building, he chose instead to stay with his friend, a quadriplegic who could not get out. President Bush mentioned his heroism in his speech at the National Cathedral on Friday.

It is in my brother's name and mine that I pray that we, this country that has been so deeply hurt, not do something that will unleash forces we will not have the power to call back.

— Rita Lasar