

SUFFERING, SEEN FROM THE CLOSEST QUARTERS

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THE FOCUS is on war-torn Afghanistan, Iraq and Liberia and expectedly the black and white images reflect the devastating effects on the people and the places. Yet Ryan Lobo's show "War and Forgiveness" is not confined to the ruins and wounds, it narrates a story of repentance and reconciliation as well.

"In 2007, I travelled to Iraq, Afghanistan and Liberia. I experienced other people's suffering at close quarters, immersed myself in stories and on occasion experienced great fear for my own life. Unlike many people, I was fortunate enough to leave," says Ryan who is involved in the making of documentary films for the last 10 years.

"War and Forgiveness" was recently exhibited at Seagull Arts and Media Resource Centre, Kolkata. Commenting on the idea behind his effort, he says, "My photographs simply tell stories, sometimes stories which we cannot have words for. I also trust that I am in the right place, that I have some purpose in being in these places. This exhibition is about intangibles I felt and have expressed through the medium of photography and writing in the catalogue, in three conflict zones. It is as much about my own perceptions and their evolution regarding these experiences as it is about the subjects I photographed."

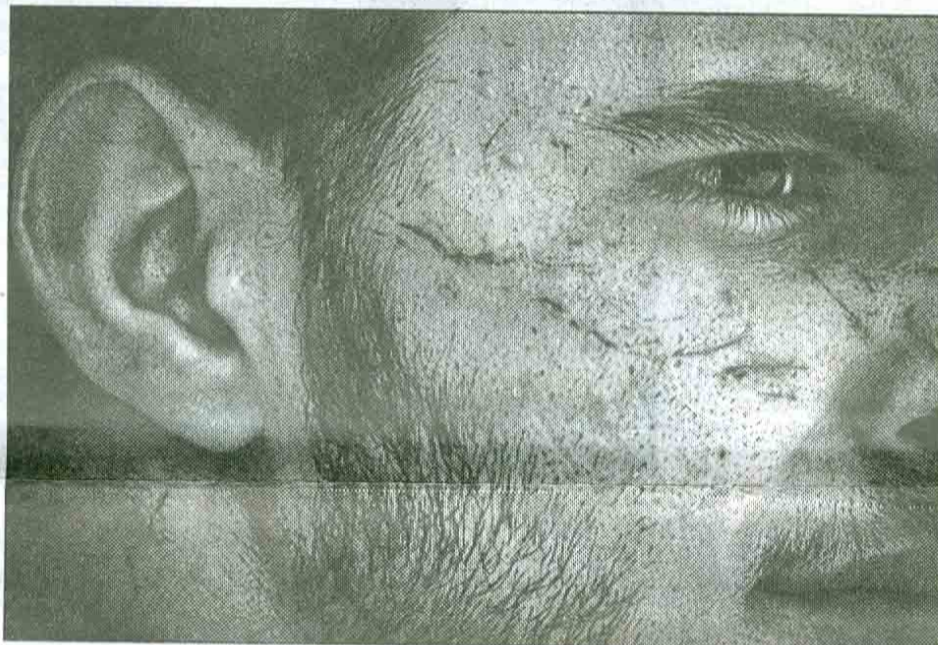
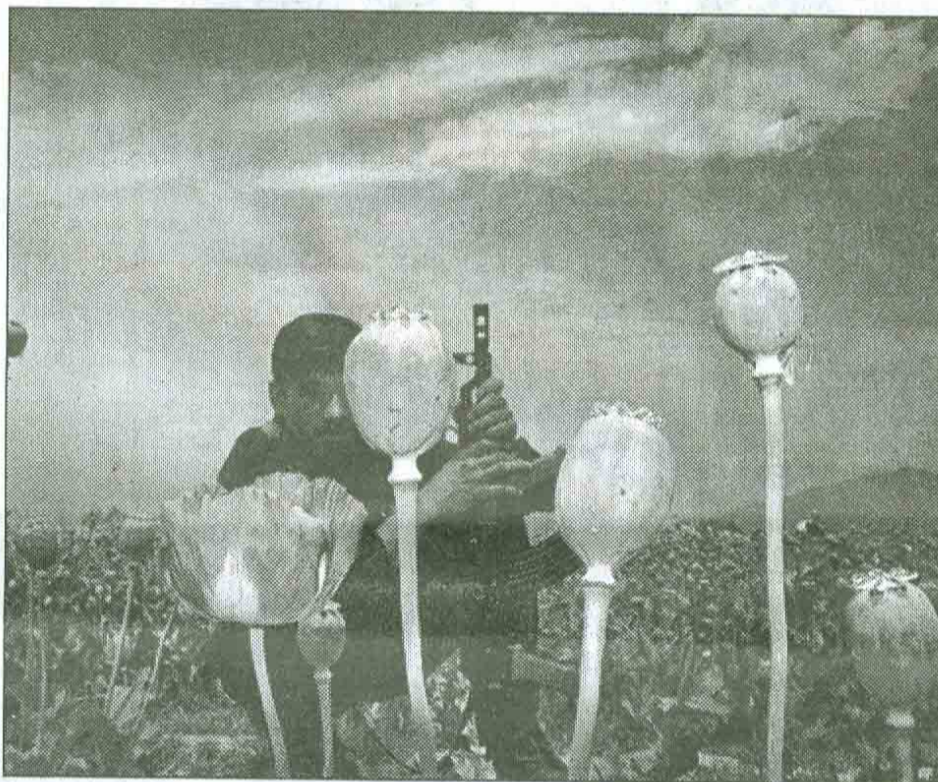
While the "war" part of the title manifests from the countries that finds mention here, the word "forgiveness" reveals another interesting

'This exhibition is as much about my own perceptions and their evolution regarding these experiences as it is about the subjects I photographed in the war-torn zones.'

As Ryan Lobo, a former child soldier, sought forgiveness and endeavoring to improve the lives of his former child soldiers. I expected him to be killed outright, but what I witnessed opened my eyes to an idea of forgiveness which I always thought seemed impossible. In the midst of incredible poverty and loss, I watched people who had nothing, absolve a man who had taken everything from them," he recalls.

The country that has held the world's attention since the last three decades left a deep impact on Ryan and his lens too. "Afghanistan is the world's largest source of illegal heroin and has a long history of opium cultivation. The Taliban cracked down on the trade and almost eradicated it. After the Taliban regime was overthrown by the US-backed Northern Alliance in 2001, opium production resumed. According to the Americans, the Taliban now fund their war with profits from the trade," he informs.

Asked about Taliban's role reversal in supporting something, they had succeeded in curbing, Ryan smiles and replies. "I don't know. You need to ask the Taliban." Here his camera had zoomed in on the only treat-



Afghan National Army Soldier in Poppy Field (top), Captured Insurgent (above) and Ryan Lobo (below).

reveals another interesting facet. "Besides Iraq and Afghanistan, I travelled to Liberia to shoot a story about a brutal warlord once called "General Butt Naked". He got his name from fighting stark naked and claims to have personally killed more than 10,000 people during Liberia's civil war. He commanded his child soldiers to commit unspeakable crimes and enforced his command with brutality. The general is now a Christian evangelist named Joshua. We accompanied him as he walked the earth, visiting villages where he had once mur-

zoomed in on the only treatment centre for heroin addicts in Kabul. "The men would have group therapy outdoors where they would recount their experiences with the drug. The stories were similar. Unemployment, boredom and no education, 99 per cent of Afghanistan is illiterate. Like the stark mountains I had flown over, they had a history of war, poverty and religion. They were very much a part of the landscape." Adding, "We also managed to visit two heroin addicts. One brought his little daughter along. They took us to an abandoned



building, some distance out of Kabul. The structure was bombed out, bullet hole marked and littered with human faeces. The little girl

waited while they smoked heroin."

As for the Iraq experience, "That country offered very limited movement for us, and blame it on security hassles." "During wait period, I thought of clicking pictures of the Iraqi lady who brought the essentials to the house. Asked, she agreed but insisted only with her face covered," he remembers with a wry laugh.

The photographer admits that memories of the places linger in the mind, long after he has crossed the borders. "What resonate in quiet moments — sometimes

months or years after a shoot — are the people on the ground in these places who I interacted with, in some cases, very briefly: the people you bond with; eat with; promise eternal friendship with; And then leave. They come in all shapes and sizes: drivers and security contractors, little girls in desolate villages far removed from a chance of education, former mass-murderers with compassion and an understanding of human-nature beyond the ordinary, simple acts of kindness from people who have suffered immensely."