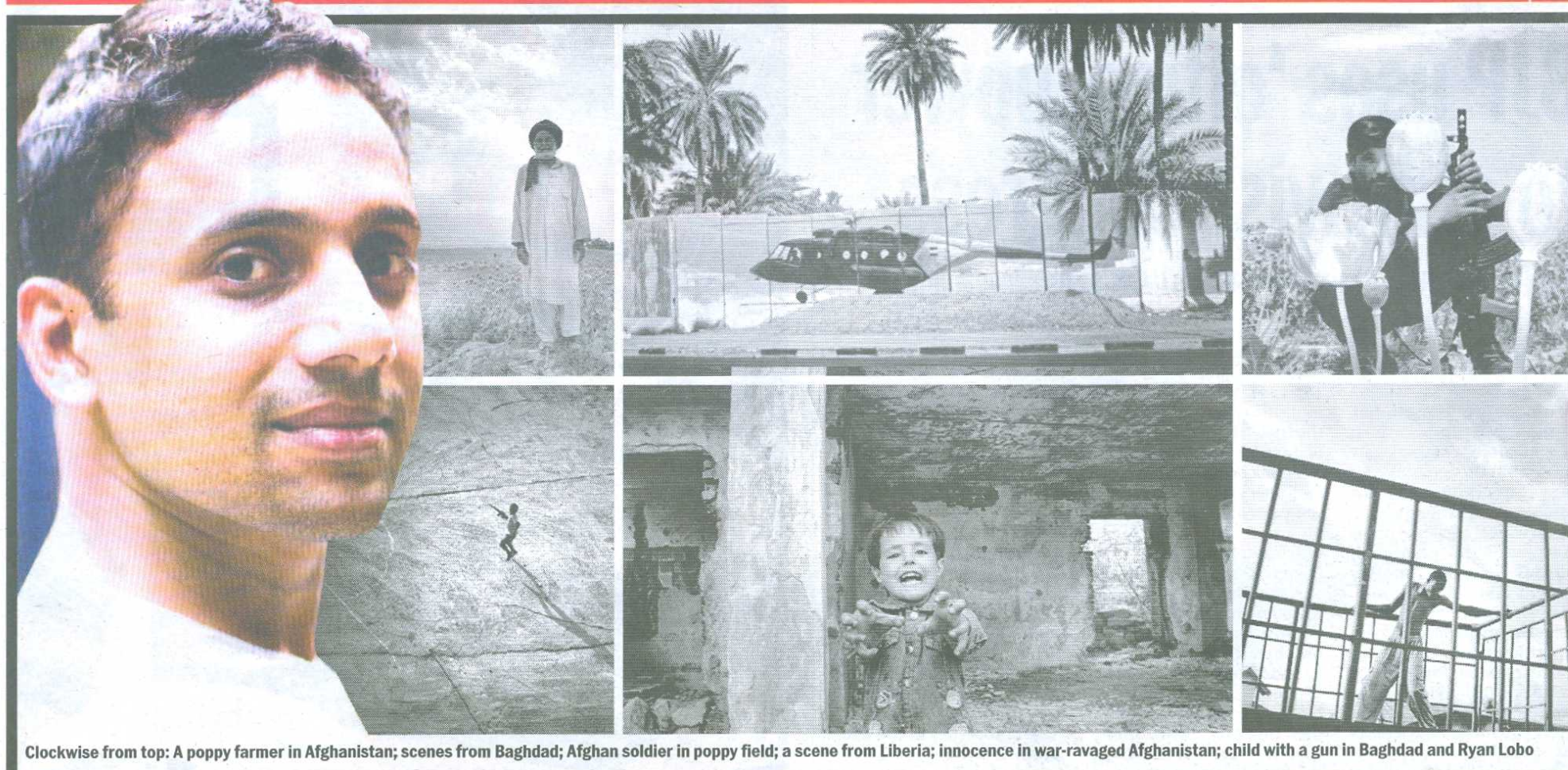


Bangalore Mirror

Behind the battle lines

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Clip: 1 of 2



Behind the battle lines

Lensman Ryan Lobo's collection of post-war photographs taken in Afghanistan, Iraq and Liberia that will be exhibited in the city brings forth the stark reality of lives of common people in war time

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The horrific story of a Liberian general's naked army (apparently the child soldiers wore only shoes and carried guns) that carried out unspeakable crimes and 20,000 deaths is stuff that no country should ever experience. But when that very general, Joshua Milton Blahyii aka General Butt Naked, transformed into an evangelical person, speaking with repentance about the crimes committed by him, eyebrows were raised.

That is one of the stories which, apart from being made into a documentary film, is told through photographs taken by Bangalore-based filmmaker and photojournalist Ryan Lobo.

Ryan is one of the producers of the filmmaker-funded documentary feature film *The Redemption of General Butt Naked* which was shot over five years in the war torn West African nation of Liberia and completed in late 2010. His film won the best cinematography award at the Sundance film festival in the US just recently. "It felt wonderful to win and the cinematographers of the film, Peter Hutchins, Ryan Hill and Eric Strauss, richly deserved the honour," says Ryan.

In 2007, Ryan travelled to Iraq, Afghanistan and Liberia where he experienced other people's suffering at close quarters and this experience makes up the collection of photographs, *War and Forgiveness*, which will be shown at Tasveer. His collection, he says, can be expressed in three stages — Liberia, a war criminal's search for redemption in the aftermath of a civil war; Afghanistan and the Taliban backed heroin trade; and Baghdad, a

city under conflict and the lives of people in war time.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

So how does he tell the story? "The elements of storytelling vary with the story teller and his or her objectives and reasons. I don't consider myself only a photojournalist but also an artist and writer. I sometimes feel that I am drawn towards certain stories. Rather than choosing the stories I feel I am a part of something much larger than just myself. I think being inspired is important and that the act of storytelling whether it is through film, photography or writing is somewhat mystical," he explains and adds that, "strange as it sounds, the story finds me."

He has photographed events and happenings that were immense, "of Shakespearean magnitude if you will, including moments when victims of horrible crimes were confronted with the man who had crippled them and murdered their family members." Ryan has always been amazed by what transpired in those moments which was often quite incredible. "I feel privileged and responsible being allowed to be a part of people lives in the avatar of a storyteller," he says.

These experiences certainly had an impact on him but like he explains, it is difficult to express exactly how. "What is challenging to me is the looking-glass experiences of personal suffering, empathy or fear. To have experienced environments of desolation, violence and fear, and to return to Bangalore where we are surrounded by injustice and corruption, which are again, war zones of a different sort where we are often the banal and apathetic audience. The most depressing thing about working in conflict zones is not the fear of death. It is about coming back home, and real-

ising that the landscape of suffering is the same everywhere. It is seeing the seeds of the same thing in our conversations, in reactions and often, in myself," Ryan recounts how his work has changed or altered him.

When the stories depicted are from places where danger is round the corner, challenges and hardships were frequent. Well, they are bound to be and like he says, "I think working anywhere presents challenges and more than ostensible dangers. On the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, I realised that I didn't know what was going on most of the time outside the sphere of protection that I was in. We had

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hired security contractors to look after us and they did their jobs well. We visited, we filmed and we left — taking with us a limited experience of these places and the stories we were following. In Iraq, I could hear gunfire and bombs going off all the time and could not move out of the protected house unless accompanied by a convoy of armed men. In Afghanistan, there was one time when we had to leave a village in a hurry as our informer told us that the Taliban were on their way there to kidnap us. In Liberia we were intimately involved."

RAISING QUESTIONS

And finally the encounter with the general. Was he convinced with the notion of asking

forgiveness for heinous crimes? Ryan's views are elaborate. "What separates Joshua from a lot of other mass murderers is that he's willing to confess and speak about his crimes openly, often approaching his former victims and asking for forgiveness. I wrestled with these issues often. What I found disturbing for myself was that Joshua is actually a likeable person and trying to fit that experience of him with his history as a brutal mass murderer was difficult at times and I had to be constantly vigilant about my own way of looking at it."

The lensman still has mixed feelings about the former general. "As we worked on this project, we noticed that Blahyii threw himself into the rehabilitation of some of his child soldiers and then abandoned them after apparently receiving death threats. While capturing the shots, my reactions about him changed and are still in a fluid state. There were times when I was brought close to tears by the emotional intensity of seeing his victims forgive him and there were times when he seemed self serving. I still question the motivation of people whose dramas unfolded before us as I do my own. The project reveals more questions than answers," he says.

Ryan is currently working on a story with photographs about the returning diaspora in Bangalore for a NY-based magazine, children's stories and a film project. His advice for working photojournalists — "I suggest integrity, meditation and listening to the little voice on the edge of things. It's easy to sensationalise or tell a story in a way that's befitting to one's own career. What truly yields fulfillment is integrity and a meditative eye on oneself."

(War and Forgiveness by Ryan Lobo at Tasveer from Feb 28-March 19)