

**W**hen I began corresponding with photographer Kate Brooks, she was at her home in Beirut, Lebanon, having just returned from Gaza. A couple of months later, she had moved to Istanbul, Turkey, for logistical reasons ("I needed a better airport and faster communications"). Since then she's traveled to Pakistan for a month and taken a weeklong video course in London. Last August, Brooks found herself juggling two assignments, one in Afghanistan—during the presidential election in the deadliest month for U.S. troops since the war began and where the Internet is remarkably slow—and one in Saudi Arabia, while attempting to get a visa for Pakistan. And that's not all. Bosnia is next.

*Globe Trekker* has nothing on Brooks.

"My sense of home is very elusive. Having lived in so many places, Moscow is home. Islamabad is home. Beirut is home. London is home. I can feel homesick for any of these places," she explains. "I try not to be away from where I live for more than a month at a time though—even coming back for a couple of days helps keep some stability and continuity in my life."

While stability is fleeting in Brooks's life, it's often absent in her photographs. Through her lens, she records grief, determination, passion, despair and strength. "I go to conflict zones to document the impact of war on civilians, not for the bang bang," states Brooks. It is what sets her work apart from other photojournalists, in a world that is impressed with shock and awe, yet desensitized to the tragedy that accompanies it.

Brooks artfully captures the human spirit when it is most vulnerable. She beautifully frames harsh reality: A man sitting with his feet propped watching billows of thick black smoke rising from a Lebanese military strike in the distance. Or Kurdish soldiers seated on the ground, preparing for the U.S. invasion of Iraq, a huge chalkboard set against a painterly panorama of rolling green hills and snow-capped mountains. These images are at once serene and chaotic. The conflict is not center stage, rather omnipresent evoking a surreal, dreamlike quality.

Even her body of political portraits is unconventional. Poised casually amidst their surroundings, the portraits reveal more about the subjects than the usual photographs we are used to seeing. Less official, more real, and no less incisive, they ask viewers to think.

"I seek to find beauty and compassion whenever possible," says Brooks. "I believe both qualities help viewers relate to the people in my pictures and reflect upon what they are seeing." That has *Time*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Smithsonian* magazine, UNICEF, *Le Monde*, *Newsweek*, the *Atlantic*, the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Economist* and many others calling.

The passion and conviction with which Brooks approaches her work emerged early, in a photojournalism course during her freshman year at George Washington University. "An image flashed across the screen capturing the immorality of racial discrimination in apartheid South Africa," she recalls. "In an instant, as a seventeen-year-old college student, I understood the power of the single image to convey the truth. I decided then and there that I wanted to be a photojournalist. My professor, John Echave, a senior editor at *National Geographic*, encouraged me to pursue my passion."

Echave spent the last twenty years at *National Geographic* and is now producing video documentaries at Blue Lagoon Productions and LS Films. "Kate displayed a maturity for visual communication rarely found in a young college student," he remembers. "From the outset, the photographs she made for class assignments went beyond showing an understanding of basic concepts of composition and light. Her photographs conveyed reality with tension and compassion; she approached her subjects and communicated their stories with an unblinking eye.

"I saw in Kate a young woman with raw visual acuity who was interested in the major issues affecting our time, and yearned to tell the story of the people affected by them, with as little

Right: "In the spring of 2009, more than two million Pakistanis were displaced when the army launched a full-scale offensive to dislodge the Taliban from the Swat Valley and surrounding districts. **Azara** fled with her family to a government-sponsored camp to escape the fighting. Here, she is pictured walking back with dinner rations to the tent she shared with her family." Ellen Tolmie, senior photography editor; UNICEF, client.

"The majority of **Pakistani refugees** ended up outside the government-sponsored camps. In some places, refugees set up their own camps, like the one pictured here outside the town of Mardan. With few supplies, some recent arrivals at the ramshackle camp did not even have tents to sleep in. Finding water to drink was also a potentially life-threatening problem with summer temperatures soaring." Ellen Tolmie, senior photography editor; UNICEF, client.

KATE

Photography  
is my life.  
It is a way to  
communicate  
that transcends  
all languages.  
At times, it has  
the power to  
change people's  
lives or influence  
foreign policy.

by Rebecca Bedrossian



prejudgment as humanly possible. She was unabashedly gutsy and confident in her vision and talent.

"As an editor, I have seen many photographers whose pictures, in spite of many years in the field, convey a story in a dramatic way, but lack refined aesthetics," he continues. "As such, their pictures are forgotten as soon as you turn the page. Kate's pictures are intriguing because she is able to wrap all the necessary elements of visual storytelling around a refined aesthetic."

While most people work for years waiting for a breakthrough moment, Brooks took it upon herself to make it happen. Having studied Russian at boarding school and in college, she spoke the language fluently. "So I turned my attention to finding a story there and began documenting the conditions in children's asylums," she states. "By the age of twenty, I had left university and was starting to freelance full-time."

"I was getting great field experience and most of my energy was devoted to helping the orphans I photographed in Russia. It was a very lonely time in my life," Brooks admits, "but I felt a great sense of responsibility."

"Kate's passion for seeking truth in social issues led her to pursue a story about abused mentally-challenged Russian children in the outskirts of Moscow," Echave recalls. "Armed with a good working knowledge of photography, perseverance and fluency in Russian, she charmed the nurses for access and made a remarkable set of pictures showing the abhorrent living conditions. The story was published in the *Sunday Telegraph*, and placed Kate on the map of every photo editor at major magazines."

After September 11, 2001, Brooks was dispatched to Pakistan for a four-day assignment. She decided to stay and record daily life in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Less than two years later, she says, "Covering the invasion of Iraq seemed only natural."

Brooks speaks of her life and work with a gravitas well beyond her 31 years. "I have sacrificed a lot for the professional choices I have made. When I was younger, I would almost never turn down an assignment from anyone. That was how I got professional experience and established myself," she explains.

A profession that regularly requires one to obtain a visa, work with a fixer (a translator with connections who makes arrangements), photograph world leaders and, once in a great while, wear body armor and embed with the U.S. Military is not for the faint of heart. When the subject of safety arises, Brooks is



practical in her assessment: "There are huge risks and, at a certain point, safety is a crapshoot," she says. "A few years ago, I was on an embed in Afghanistan. I had to decide if I was going to ride in the first or second vehicle. I choose the second."

The first was blown up. The only way in that situation to guarantee safety was to not take the assignment in the first place."

It's hard for most people to imagine being faced with such an intense reality, keep emotions in check and still find the perseverance to finish a job, but that's exactly what Brooks does. She was in Northern Iraq, for *Time*, when the war began. Alice Gabriner, former chief picture editor at *Time* and now deputy director of the White House Photo Office, recalls speaking to Brooks after she witnessed the death of a fellow journalist and friend in a car bomb explosion. "Although I will never forget hearing her agitated voice on the phone, she reacted as a professional and photographed his blood being washed away, and then sent those pictures immediately, for our Saturday deadline."

"Too many times over the years I spoke to Kate after what would be a devastating occurrence for most people," Gabriner continues. "Not only did she maintain her composure in these situations, she created some of her best work. Time and again, I've witnessed her compassion and conviction in the field through her pictures."

In a 2003 panel discussion on *The Charlie Rose Show*, Brooks sat around the table with fellow war photographers James Nachtwey, Robert Nickelsberg and Yuri Kozyrev discussing the war in Iraq. As expected, the show's host broached the subject of gender. Brooks doesn't see being female as a disadvantage at all. In fact, reporting from much of the Muslim world, she has much greater access into women's daily lives than many of her male counterparts. And it is often those images of life in war-torn regions that resonate with viewers.

Brooks is American, though she admits it can be a liability in the field. Her father resides in Niagra Falls, New York, where she grew up, her mother is in New Mexico. Though they worry about a daughter in the midst of international conflicts, they actually planted the adventurous seeds of travel. Her mother, a molecular biologist turned medical doctor, and environmentalist father returned from Morocco when Brooks was born. "I grew up looking at great pictures my father had taken over the seven years he spent in North Africa," Brooks says.

To deal with the realities of their daughter's career, they've adopted a rather Zen attitude. "My mother and I had a very

Right: "President Asif Ali Zardari poses next to two pictures of his deceased wife, Benazir Bhutto, in front of a picture of Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, and both the national and presidential flags of Pakistan." Arem Duplessis, art director; The New York Times Magazine, client.

"Former Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, President Hamid Karzai's most powerful rival in the 2009 Afghan presidential elections, returns by helicopter from a rally in Samangan." Tomaso Capuano, design director; Jack Van Antwerp, director of photography; The Wall Street Journal, client.

"Saad Hariri, son of assassinated Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, was appointed to his father's former position in June 2009. In less than three months he resigned after Hezbollah continually blocked his efforts at forming a unity government." Personal work.





## Kate Brooks



serious conversation about death and injury a couple of years ago. I was impressed to understand how her attitude has evolved.

"During the 2006 war in Lebanon, my father said he would rather me be there than in Afghanistan or Iraq. He was calmer about 5,000 pound Israeli bombs being dropped a few kilometers from my house than I was," she says. "His point was that in Lebanon my chances of personally being targeted were slim. Both my mother and father really struggled with me being in Iraq, and their worry was definitely a factor in the decision not to regularly work there."

After spending the past two years, taking shorter assignments in an effort to be home more, Brooks has once again embraced life on the road. Since last May, she's only been home for three weeks, energized by what she enjoys most in her work: "The



Left: "Thirteen Israelis and an estimated 1,300 Palestinians were killed during **Operation Cast Lead**. An estimated 4,000 homes were destroyed and 17,000 damaged. A woman on the border of Rafah cleans what remains of her home that was damaged in Israeli air strikes." Ellen Tolmie, senior photography editor: UNICEF, client.

"After fighting broke out between extremist group Fatah al Islam and the Lebanese army in May 2007, the military carried out an offensive. **A man watches the Lebanese army shell Naher al Bared** refugee camp from his rooftop." Mike Bealing, photo editor: Time, Europe, client.

This page: "Stretching from Ural Mountains on the eastern edge of Europe to the Pacific Ocean, **Siberia** accounts for 77 percent of Russia's territory, although only 25 percent of the population lives there. The Russian Republic of Tyva is located in southern Siberia." OXFAM, client.

"**Afghan women perform Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*** in Kabul in 2005. Such performances were banned under the Taliban. This was the first performance of Shakespeare since the Soviet invasion in 1979."

"**Sabra Abu Hanna** was forced to flee the village of Tanturra, in what today is Israel, when Israel was created in 1948. She has never been able to return and has seen two generations of her family grow up at the Latakia refugee camp in Syria. Her daughter, Zaccharia, sits to her right and her granddaughter, Mona, to her left. Six decades after the Nakba, the word Palestinians use to describe the forced mass migration caused by Israel's creation, Hanna waits to return to her ancestral village along with her family." Ellen Tolmie, senior photography editor: UNICEF, client.



figurative journey and literal adventure. The people I meet along the way. Capturing images that evoke compassion rather than a feeling of helplessness. Getting dirty, feeling hungry and abandoning myself to my work and to the moment.

"I've lived *a lot* and seen *a lot*," she continues. "All of the experiences are stored in my cells. I always say that photojournalism isn't a job, it's an all-consuming vocation, a lifestyle—for some it's even a religion."

Brooks devotes herself to the religion of the here and now while in the field. In our last correspondence before press, she sent the following journal excerpt, illustrating in riveting detail the "work" behind the



This page: "Former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, the main challenger to Afghan President Hamid Karzai in the **2009 presidential election**, greets crowds in the town of Khajeh Ba Aldin."

"Sporadic bombs and suicide attacks scared voters away from polls during the August 20 election in Afghanistan. Here, police with dogs stop cars at a **checkpoint in Kabul** in an effort to stymie insurgents. An hour after the picture was taken there was a rocket attack in that neighborhood."

"**Female supporters of Dr. Abdullah**, an ophthalmologist by training, gather to hear him speak in the town of Taloqan, prior to the election."

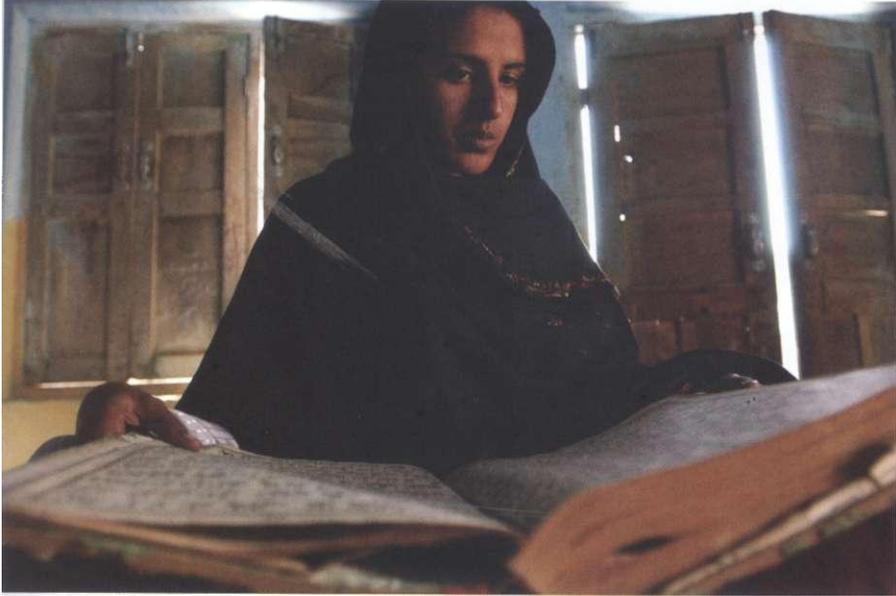
Right: Unpublished photograph for *People Weekly*. "**Mukhtar Mai Bibi** was gang raped in 2002 by men from her village on the orders of a tribal council. The rape was imposed as punishment for an alleged affair her brother had with a woman from the same village. The rape sparked outrage in Pakistan and the world, yet the men who were convicted of rape were later acquitted on appeal. The case is now pending before Pakistan's Supreme Court. Ms. Mai, meanwhile, used the initial compensation money she received from the government to open a school in the village where she lives, and has become a symbol for women's rights in Pakistan."

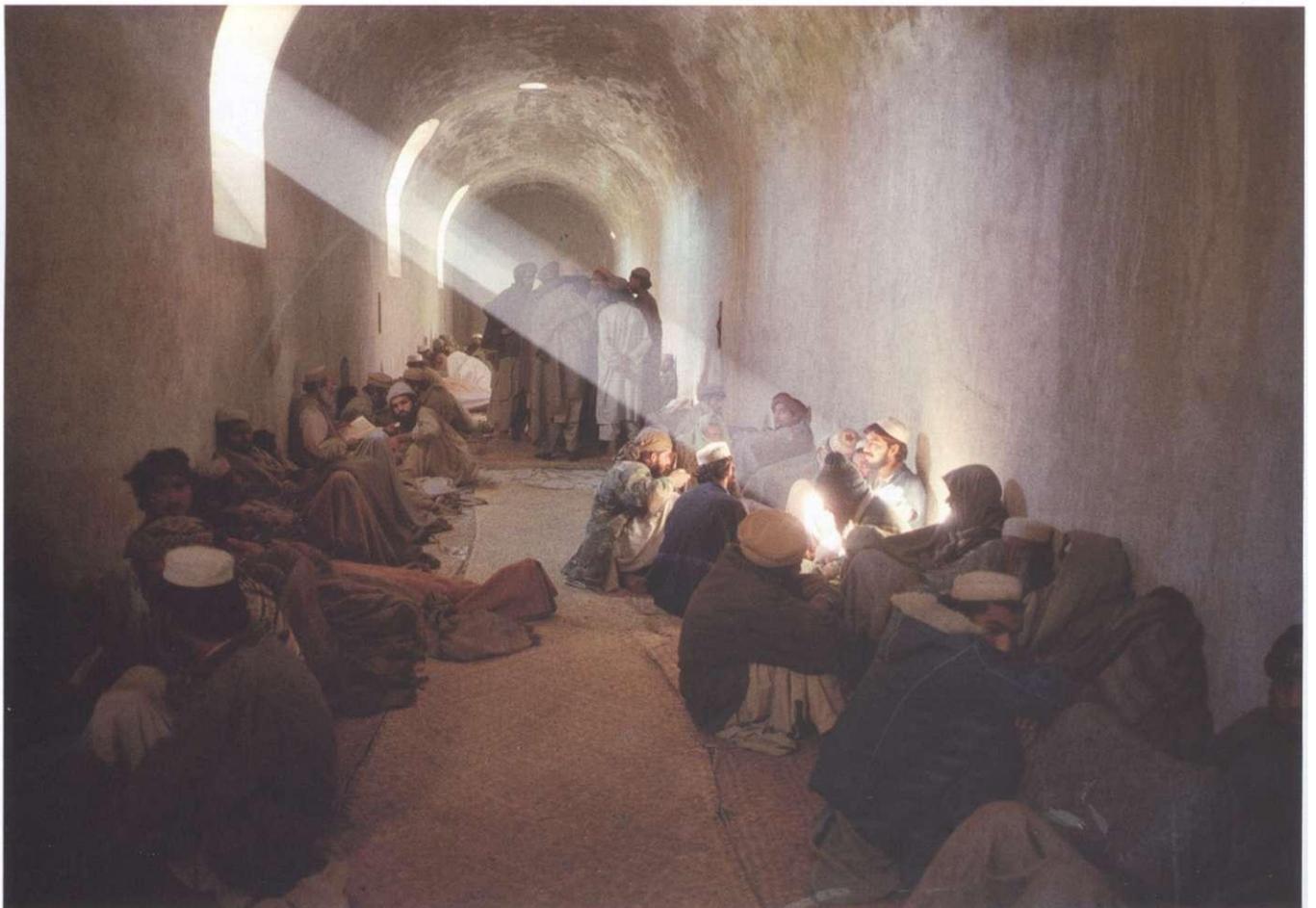
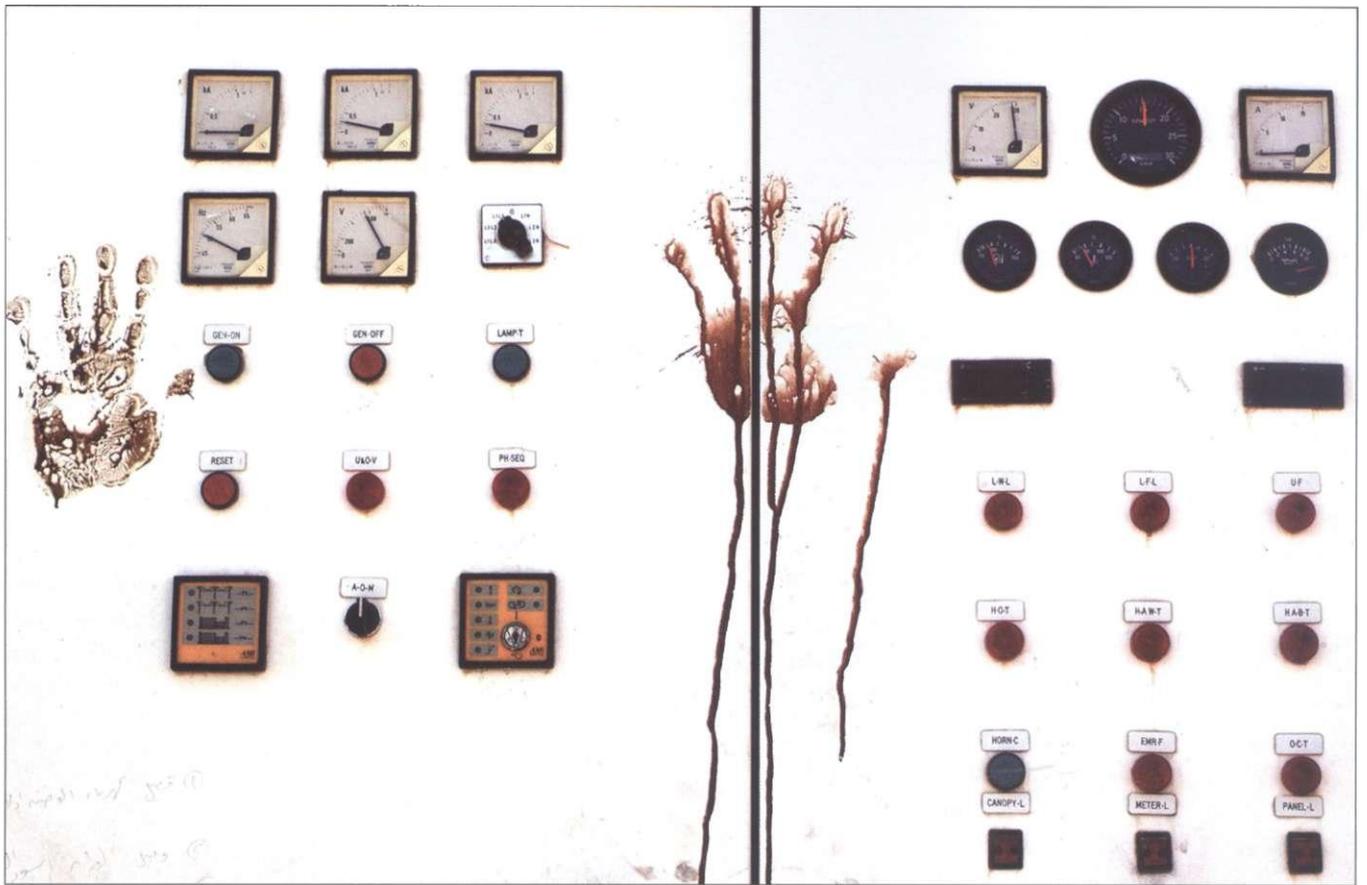


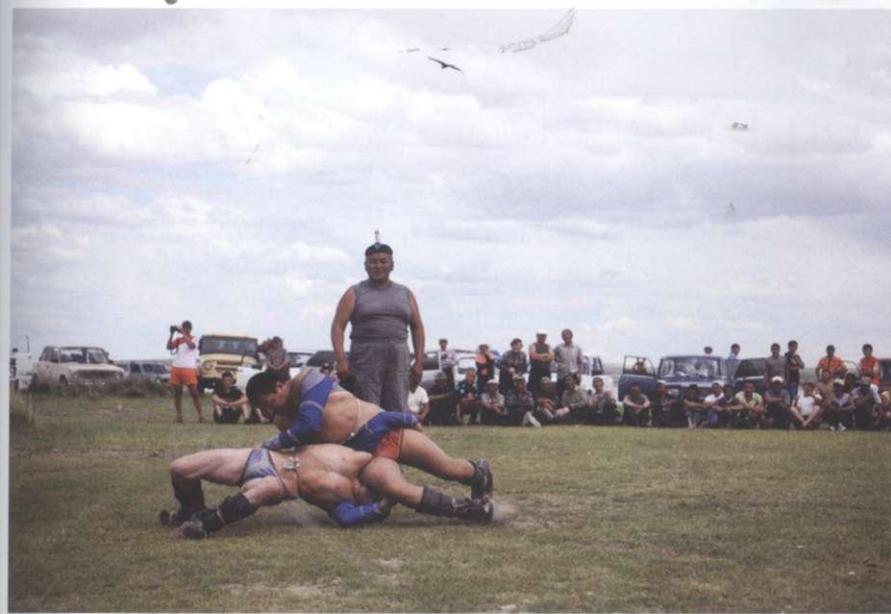
"**Gays, lesbians and transsexuals in Iran** face persecution, and an increasing number have fled the country. Many first go to Turkey, where they do not need visas to visit, but cannot permanently settle. They wait for years to get asylum in Canada, the U.S., Australia or Europe. Sheyda is a hairstylist who had a sex-change. In Iran she became engaged to a man, whose family forbade the marriage. Her ex-fiancee committed suicide, and his family has since threatened to kill her. She arrived in Turkey in October 2008 and is still waiting to be granted asylum elsewhere." David Gray, creative director: Annie Chia, photo editor: Out Magazine, client.



"At a Halloween party at **Beirut's C Lounge**, women dance on the bar to compete for the title of sexiest woman." The New York Times, client.







photographs we all take for granted:

*Since I arrived in Afghanistan to cover the elections, I've been punched in the nose three times and hit in the head once. Every time I am in a crowd, Afghan men grab my crotch. I was even groped at the site of a suicide bombing where a group of people stood staring at a dismembered foot and hand. My translator was about to clock the guy, but I restrained him not knowing how much anti-Western sentiment there might be...*

*A subject I had just photographed for an article called me while I was at the rock concert of Farid Daria. He said he wanted to throw a party in my honor. He told me again and again how I was the sweetest girl he had every met...He finished the conversation asking if I would give him a kiss over the phone. The concert began. Crippled Mujahidin were being used as security guards. Some of them beat the kids with their crutches as they got rowdy. As I photographed the crowds going wild, someone sprayed liquid into my eye from the crowd. I saw the color red and then my vision went blurry as my eyes began to burn. I suddenly thought it might have been an acid attack. My colleagues and I frantically began pouring water into my eyes to flush them out and after ten minutes the stinging subsided and my vision returned to normal. Later that night a friend said to me, 'Well you had a pretty good day.'*

*What indicates a good day? I am still alive. I can still see. My nose isn't crooked. CA*

Left: "In keeping with Iraqi tradition, a shopkeeper slaughtered a sheep and marked his generator with his **bloody handprints** to ask for God's protection, after a U.S. checkpoint shooting in which five civilians were killed." Arthur Hoshstein, art director: Michelle Stephenson, director of photography: Time, client.

"**Pakistani Islamist militants** are held in a makeshift prison after being captured for illegally entering Afghanistan. Afghan authorities later released them as part of a Ramadan amnesty."

This page: "In 1921, the Bolsheviks established the Tuvan People's Republic. Nomadic life and native spirituality were forbidden, after the Soviet Union formally annexed the republic in 1944. Since the Soviet Union's collapse, Tyvans are enjoying a cultural renaissance. The name of the republic has changed to **Tyva**. Here, Tyvans gather for a wrestling festival close to Lake Tere-Khol." OXFAM, client.