

Viewpoint

An excerpt from the introduction to:

***We Can't Say We Didn't Know* - by Sophie McNeill, ABC Investigative Reporter**

As I worked at my desk in Jerusalem, voice messages from Syria would pop up on my phone throughout the day and late into the night.

Some were from Dr. Khaled Naanaa in his makeshift clinic in the opposition-held town of Madaya, near Damascus. *'Please, the international community must act fast to save the lives of people,'* he begged in one message. Khaled was only about 250 kilometres from where I sat, but his village was besieged, tightly surrounded on all sides by pro-regime forces loyal to Syria's brutal dictator, Bashar Al Assad. For the past five months, no food had been allowed in for Madaya's civilians and no one allowed out. *'People are starving here,'* he said.....

Children starving to death just 40 kilometres from Damascus? It was a shocking new low, even for Syria's deprived war.

Khaled's photos and videos featured on the front pages of newspapers and news channels around the world...(They) were even referred to at the UN General Assembly.

But nothing changed.

Over the next 15 months medics documented (the growing number of deaths) in the besieged town. All had starved to death less than an hour's drive from UN warehouses packed full of food in Damascus.

The (continuing) steady stream of human rights abuses, most perpetrated by state actors upon innocent civilians, was hard to comprehend.

What had our world become?....

In 2015 I moved my young family to Jerusalem for my dream job: Middle East correspondent for ABC Australia. I arrived to find the region ablaze.

In Syria, the civil war was about to take a deadly new turn as Russia intervened to help the Assad regime retake opposition-held towns and cities across the country.

Saudi Arabia had begun a massive aerial bombing campaign on its poverty-stricken southern neighbour, Yemen, as it tried to force Yemen's Houthi rebels, who had taken over the north, out of power.

Gaza was recovering from its third war with Israel in six years, with more than 1400 civilians killed in 2014, including 551 children.

Islamic state militants had taken over large swathes of eastern Syria and northern Iraq, forcing millions of civilians to live under their brutal rule, as the coalition began a widespread campaign of airstrikes to try to defeat the jihadists.

My role was to work as a video journalist covering the whole of the Middle East. But in every story, civilians were enduring unspeakable fear and suffering. Civilian homes, markets and schools were being targeted. Food was being used as a weapon of war. Cluster bombs. Poison-gas attacks. Hospitals bombed. Doctors living in fear. Deliberate attacks on aid convoys. 'Double tap' strikes on rescue workers, where a bombsite is quickly hit a second time, with the aim of targeting the wounded and the medical personnel tending to them. The denial of medical care to civilians, including children, as a deliberate act to achieve a political objective.

Whether the aggressor was a jihadist group like ISIS, an oppressive dictatorship like the Syrian regime, or a coalition of Western nations led by the U.S., civilians and civilian infrastructure were in the firing line.

'We know terrorist groups have little interest in international law. But too many governments now believe they have licence to behave in rogue fashion, as they lack consequence and incentive to change course,' argues David Miliband, the former UK foreign secretary and President of the international Rescue Committee, writing about Yemen. *'It is lame and inexcusable to claim that because terrorists do not live up to high standards, neither should they. If the most powerful countries in the world do not set an example, then it is impossible to police the system.'*

We can't look back at what's happening now across this region and say we didn't know. The spread of information now is very different to the days of genocide in Rwanda, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, or the final stages of the Sri Lankan civil war. We have reached a point where the public can now know what is happening – how many are being killed, where and by whom. There was nothing we didn't tell you about Syria – that war is certainly the most reported conflict in world history. When journalists couldn't access sites, the evidence was clear from satellites and mobile phone footage filmed by the brave Syrians who chose to stay behind. In many cases war crimes were live-tweeted – you could watch them streamed live on YouTube. Sometimes they even went viral.

The endless suffering, violations of international law, and litany of war crimes have been meticulously documented. Yet the world has chosen to look the other way. The precedents set during the last decade are staggering. The consequences will haunt us for years.

'Where there once was outrage and demands for action, complacency has set in,' says Philippe Boloipon, who spent years as Human Rights Watch's key advocate at the UN in New York. *'How did it come to this?'*

At first I felt so privileged to be entrusted to tell the stories of (these) incredibly brave (people).....

After awhile I became too ashamed to ask a Syrian trapped inside to give me any of their precious time or energy to help me report what was happening. What difference did it make? As one of my Syrian contacts said: *'Please, we are sick of filming it and taking pictures. You have seen it all. You know exactly what's happening to us. Just let us die in peace.'*

Is this the price we pay for 24-hour news and social media? Are we all so overwhelmed by the horror, visible at our fingertips, of what's happening in the world that even the best of us with good intentions can't see where or how we can make a difference?

I now feel broken by what feels like a lack of cut-through.

I'm not alone. Many journalists, humanitarians and activists I speak to share similar feelings.

But we cannot just let this impunity continue.

This book documents the consequences for ordinary people when all the rules are broken and shows how this situation must be reversed if we have any hope of achieving a more peaceful planet in the future. In it you will meet amazing, brave, defiant people who bear the brunt of this lawlessness but refuse to kowtow to it and refuse to accept that they can't change the world for better. They are people just like you and me. Many of them have lost everything in order to stand up for what they believe in.

I hope you draw the same inspiration from them as I have and that you too will no longer look the other way.

My book is just a small way of trying to honour these heroes.

These are their stories.

Sophie McNeill, January 2020.

Or in the words of Bob Dylan:

How many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see...

LBLG Editor