

Clothes maketh the man



He was considered to be not a guardian angel but a conspirator with the enemy, writes DR SALIM PARKER.

HE was an engineer working at the jamaraat during Hajj. Immensely aware of his duties in assisting with the smooth flow of the pilgrims during the days of pelting, he wore his uniform with pride and served his country with distinction.

As he was a member of the National Guard, which is part of the Defence Ministry, he, like all other members, wore the army uniform. Even the medical personnel falling under the National Guard wear military uniform when not performing clinical duties.

It never occurred to him that the clothes indeed mark the man but one incident shattered his perception of what the uniform meant to the ordinary hujaaj who undertake the most important journey of their lives.

He, who was under the impression that he was there to help the pilgrims and felt honoured to be able to do so, was considered to be not a guardian angel but a conspirator with the enemy.

It was 2006 and millions were in attendance for Hajj that year. The ultimate peak of the journey, the Wuqoof on Arafah had passed without any incidents, and most did not anticipate any problems during the next few days.

However, we were all shocked when on one of the days of Tashreeq, the days of stoning, just after midday, a stampede occurred which resulted in the death of more than 360 pilgrims.

I was among the South African medical contingent that was asked to assist, and what unfolded in front of us was horrifying as the suffering that our martyrs had endured was evident from the injuries we witnessed. It was soon evident that a major catastrophe had taken place and credit has to

be given to the Saudi authorities who soon redeployed enough personnel to render the need for further assistance unnecessary.

He was part of the engineering team tasked with photographing whatever they could see in front of, and around them. First, they were torn in performing their duties and assisting the battered bodies and shattered souls that clearly, desperately needed help.

However, as soon as reinforcements arrived, they manfully stuck to their task and did as much as possible within the limitations of the environment in which they were working. He was in charge of the division that had to photographically document the tragedy, and when this was accomplished, gave his team the option to leave the scene or assist the medical personnel with rendering assistance to the wounded or respectfully help in removing the bodies of the deceased. Needless to say, all stayed behind to help in whatever way they could. With some it was easy as they merely needed to transport the injured to the medical facilities to be treated. With others it was much, much more heart-rending.

He had no medical training. As he scouted the area, he noticed a lady crouching. She was seemingly in a state of shock. She was an elderly Turkish lady and, despite the mayhem around her, was immobile, with her head bowed.

He approached her and noticed a man lying on the ground, his head on her lap. Amidst the frantic scurrying that was occurring around them, no one noticed this couple. He then noticed her gently and very slowly stroking the forehead of the elderly man, most likely her husband.

'At least she was moving,' were his relieved thoughts.



(Above and below) Although tasked with maintaining order and the safety of the pilgrims, the way they treat the pilgrims have caused that these officials are viewed with suspicion to the point of being despised by the very people they are supposed to protect. Photos SALIM PARKER



The man showed no evident signs of injuries and he asked her in Arabic whether he could assist her. She was completely silent and did not respond, continuing to stroke her husband's forehead in a loving manner.

It then struck him that the chest of the husband was not rising and falling as with all the other survivors he had assisted. The man was showing no signs of life.

He was not trained to deal with disaster nor with the heartbreak of the loss of a loved one. In full military regalia he knelt down and, in his own uncertain way, tried to establish any sign of life. There was none.

The elderly lady was clearly aware of her loss. Still, she did not make any attempt to communicate with anyone and clung onto the last physical manifestations of her long-standing soulmate. She was profusely sweating, a combination of her response to the heat and the cold, clammy response to shock.

He had his water bottle attached to his belt and detached it. He opened it and, with the utmost empathy, handed it to her. It was the least he could do. He, however, did not expect her response.

She did not sip on the bottle to relieve her very evident thirst. Nor did she put some of the water on her husband's forehead, which she was still stroking.

She hurled the water back at his face, waved him away and turned her back on him.

He was completely taken aback and retreated a few steps. The lady did not look at him and remained in the same position. He just stood there, not knowing what to do as he wanted to help and she clearly did not want his assistance.

A doctor, in a white coat and stethoscope approached the lady. She allowed him to examine her husband, allowed him to examine her and drank some of the water that the other medical team members, who by now had joined them, offered her.

The lady started first to cry then started wailing as the reality of her loss sunk in, with the medics consoling her as much as they humanely could.

The engineer could not understand what had just happened to him until he noticed the fear and apprehension that was evident in the faces of the pilgrims that he passed. He was in full military uniform, and it was evident that he was perceived to be the enemy.

He made some enquiries and realised that the long-standing tension between the security forces and the hujaaj they monitored and policed was a long-standing, unresolved issue. Often, the security forces, with no explanation and in a very military-like manner, would forcefully impose rules on the pilgrims.

Sometimes, they would suddenly divert them, sometimes completely deny them access to a road, and sometimes very rudely

yell orders that did not make sense to the bewildered hujaaj who were merely attempting to complete their rituals.

The lady clearly had been previously traumatised and possibly felt that the actions of the security forces had led to the death of her husband.

When he spoke to the security forces, he realised that they, in return, regarded the pilgrims to be their enemy as well – a bunch of ill-disciplined and lawless illiterates who needed the full physical might of the law to force them to comply.

He held a relatively junior position and clearly was unprepared to deal with this matter. He decided to study crowd psychology and, over the next few years, did his doctorate on the subject.

Ten years later, and now in a senior position, he was able to start to change the mindset of the security forces, instilling in them a sense of serving the pilgrims rather than monitoring an unruly mob.

Instead of shunning the pilgrims, the soldiers now spray them with cooling water in the oppressive heat.

Maybe his ideal has not been reached but at least he realised that there was a problem. He gained a deep understanding of it and, in his small, humble way, is bringing about major shifts in mindsets in order to harmonise the experiences of all those involved in the fifth pillar of Islam.