

Mahtab's Story



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Chapter One

MAHTAB ACHED.

She rubbed her freezing hands together and pressed them into her mouth, sucking the life back into them. Kilometre after kilometre, the cold continued. Icy air seeped up from the floor of the truck and made its way through the layers of her cotton weave trousers. It slipped through the timber joints near her head and chilled her face, her neck and her shoulders. It brought with it a fine, pale powder that worked its way into her hair, her eyes and her nose. All she could taste was diesel and dust.

Mahtab wanted to leap up, to drum her heels against the floor, to fling her arms into the air and

yell as if her heart and lungs would burst. But her throat was a closed and choking trapdoor. She was compelled and sentenced to silence.

Farhad crouched beside her, his head not quite to her shoulder, exhausted and dulled into sleep. In the shadows, Mahtab could just make out the shape of her mother beside him. Soraya, thumb in mouth, was pressed against her, each as still as a block of stone.

Every rock, every pothole and gouge in the road jarred her body against the rough timber that held her in.

Would they ever get there? Would it ever be over?



When had the fog of darkness and fear wrapped itself around the house? That fog that closed them in, all except Grandfather, Uncle Wahid and her own father too, until... She pushed that thought away. Think of before. Think of times like the wedding of Aunt Mina and Uncle Wahid when she was six. No fog then. They had all gone out to the hall and there was music and dancing and rows of tables laden with dishes of goat and lamb kebab, sweet fruit and yoghurt. Aunt Mina was queen for the night and even Mahtab had henna on her hands and had stayed up long after Farhad and the baby Soraya fell asleep. But Soraya wasn't a baby any more. She was almost ready to learn to read.

The fog must have been there the afternoon with the kites or why would Uncle Wahid have come running? 'Stop! STOP!' he yelled and the sleeves of his shirt flew wide and the afternoon sun glinted off the red lights of his beard. Farhad and Reza were racing around the yard with their kites. They challenged each other, laughing and whipping the strings, sharp with their fragments of glass, to slide against each other. It was a weird dance. They risked one cutting the other free, sending the bright blue and red squares flying, high into the open sky, across the city, lost for ever.

Mahtab and Leila sat under the lemon tree and watched.

'You must never,' screamed Uncle Wahid, 'never play this way again.' He grabbed the strings, hauling them to his chest so swiftly that his hands were torn by the shiny splinters and his blood splashed first on the pale cotton of his trousers and then on the grass at his feet. 'You are putting the whole family in danger, you will be killed and your fathers and your mothers and your brothers and your sisters and your cousins and what do you think you are doing? You have been told that everything has changed and you are never, never, never to play like this again.'

Everything had changed. Mahtab held tightly to Leila's hand. They watched as the boys, snivelling and shrunken, took the shovel and dug a hole under

the lemon tree and buried the folded kites in the hard brown earth. They kicked dirt on the brightly coloured fabric, and when they had trodden the clods down Uncle put his arms around their shoulders and patted them, guiding them back into the house. They lay, curled up like babies, crying on their beds.



Around that time, Leila began to come less often. Before, when their parents sat downstairs, talking and feasting on plates piled high with apricots and almonds, pears and pistachios, Mahtab and she slept above them on the roof. Warm under a single summer blanket, they planned their lives. 'I will be a teacher like my Aunt Mariam,' said Leila. 'And I will have five children and a handsome husband.'

'I will be a doctor like Grandma's sister,' said Mahtab. 'And my husband will be handsome too. I think I'll have three children, all girls because boys are so much trouble.' They giggled and pointed at the sky and claimed the stars as their own.



But then school had stopped. For a time secret lessons continued with a tutor, but then Leila and her family were gone.



'Where is she?' said Mahtab. 'Why didn't she say goodbye? She is my friend, my sister.'

'They are gone to Iran,' her father said. 'They left secretly because there was great danger for her family. Her father knew that if he stayed...' He turned away.

'Will I see her again?' Mahtab seized his hand and looked up at him. He did not meet her gaze but pulled her tightly towards him and kissed the top of her head.

'Who knows, my Mahtab? Who knows?'

Mahtab lay on her bed, awake long into the night. Why was Leila's family in danger? Were they now safe from whatever that danger had been? Was she somewhere in Iran and was she thinking of Mahtab? Were she, Mahtab, and her family in danger also? Would they too go to Iran?



The house was different. She remembered nights when the whole family sat around the low table. They warmed their feet by the coal brazier under the blanket. Her grandmother poured tea and passed around the steaming glasses. The gold chains and coins at her wrist jangled, flicking the soft light from the kerosene lamp into the faces of Mahtab, Farhad, Soraya and their cousins Reza and baby Rasheed.

Her grandfather told stories: The Thousand and One Nights, Aladdin, Ali Baba, Sinbad, The Ebony Horse. The younger ones fell asleep but Mahtab

willed her eyes to stay open as he stroked his beard and his gentle voice spun the tales and more tea was brewed. Finally her eyelids drooped and she rested her head in her grandmother's lap.



Now that fog had seeped into the house and into their lives. There would be no education for girls. Mahtab could no longer go to school. Her mother no longer went to work. The women almost never left the house. Instead they sat at home and waited till Mahtab's father, her uncle and her grandfather came home at the end of the day. They brought with them news of the outside, fearful news, which they shared with the women in hushed voices. Mahtab was sent from the room.



She listened. She hushed Farhad and Soraya as they chased each other from the kitchen to the storeroom and back again. She stood in the doorway and heard the words 'men in black turbans ... whips ... beatings ... the knock on the door in the middle of the night ... hanging ... shooting ... public stoning ... Taliban.' On one evening her grandmother found her there, her ear pressed to the door.

'Go to your room this minute,' she said in a voice that Mahtab had not heard before. Later that night she came and lay on the bed beside Mahtab and

stroked her hair. 'I am so sorry to speak harshly,' she said, 'so sorry and you all so young.'

'Will someone come and knock on our door?' Mahtab's voice was only a whisper.

Her grandmother didn't answer but pulled her close and held her so tightly that Mahtab fell asleep to the rhythm of the old woman's beating heart.



Then, one night, her father and grandfather did not come home at the usual time. Mahtab sat quietly in the shadows, listening as her mother, aunt and grandmother paced the floor, speaking in urgent whispers. Uncle Wahid went to search. The whole house waited. Some time in the darkness her father was there, alive, his face black with bruising, one eye closed and swollen, broad stripes of blood seeping through the cotton shirt on his back. Of Grandfather, there was nothing: no body, no word.



Night after night the whispering and the weeping continued.



Mahtab sat in the dark outside her parents' bedroom door, watching over her father. As long as she stayed within sight she knew he would get better. She watched her mother tending the bruises on his face, the cuts on his chest, the slashes across his back

from the whips. When he moved, slowly, into the sitting room, Mahtab followed. When he rested in the garden, in the sun, she sat at his feet. She brought him his favourite slices of apple, poured him his tea with sprigs of mint. He said little but stared at her and at Farhad and Soraya as they played on the swing and splashed in the paddling pool.

One night she woke to hear sounds from her parents' room. Uncle Wahid's voice and then Aunt Mina: 'How can you leave?' She was weeping. 'Our family has lived in this city forever. You were born here. Your children were born here. All of the family is buried here. You will be strangers in a strange land. You will be leaving everything you know and love behind.'

'We know that.' This was her mother's voice. 'But I do not want my young children to be buried before their time or to have to bury me while they are young. I want them free from fear, free of all this. We must go, for them.' Mahtab knew she had been crying too.

'But it is too dangerous to leave.'

'It is too dangerous to stay.'

'It means a long drive over the mountains, and even before then they have their men everywhere. And bandits too, who will take your money. There are even wild animals, wolves. You can trust nobody.'

'We can trust nobody in this place either,' Mahtab's father said. 'Who knows if they will come

for me again? Look what they did to our father. Our neighbour's son has been taken. In every street someone has gone.'

'Please don't go. Please.'

'We've made up our minds. We must go.'



Gradually her father's body healed but he no longer went to work in the daytime and at night the books Mahtab so loved to hear him read stayed unopened. He never sat at the low table and taught her the way to move her chess pieces to outwit him, and all stories, all laughter, all joking seemed to have gone from him.

Then one night he came and sat on her bed. 'I need to talk to you,' he said. 'Your mother and I have made a very big decision.'

'Are we going to Iran?'

He shook his head. 'We are leaving, but not for Iran. First I want to tell you a story.' He folded his arms and took a deep breath. 'When I was a young man at the University, I met a stranger in a coffee shop. He was about my age and he came from a faraway land called Australia. He was travelling from his country to Europe on a great adventure, and he had stopped here because many, many years ago, his great-great-great-grandfather had left Afghanistan and crossed the seas to Australia to work with camels. So this

young man wanted to be in the land of his ancestors. I brought him home and he stayed with us for some time. He wanted to learn as much about our country as he could and so we talked long into the evenings. In return he told us much about his country. I am going to tell you everything I can remember because I want you to know that the way we are living here, now, is not the only way. One day, like that man's great-great-great-grandfather, we may have to leave.'

'You mean,' Mahtab hesitated, 'go to his country, his Australia?'

Her father nodded.

'But would we come back?'

'I don't know. God willing. Listen well and remember. If we go to that man's country, you would not stay at home. You would go to school and you could dream again of being a doctor like your great-aunt or a teacher or whatever you wanted to be. The women work as they did here, before. You and Mum could walk in the sunshine with your faces bare and there are no men in black turbans who can take you and beat you because they do not like the way you dress or what you believe or what you say. There, whips are for horses and camels.'

'Is it a long way?'

He nodded.

'Can I take all my things?'

'Maybe not everything. It is further than Iran. Tomorrow, I will show you in the atlas.'



It was still dark when Mahtab woke. She lay still. Australia. She said the word over and over but she had no picture in her mind. What would it look like? How would they get there? She crept towards her parents' room. She paused in the doorway, listening to the soft murmuring of their voices. Again her mother was crying and she heard her saying, 'We will die out there. In the mountains. On the sea. It is not too late to choose Iran.'

Mahtab clutched the front of her nightdress. Her body trembled. Choose Iran. Leila is there. We will be together and then we will return and I do not want to journey through the mountains and over the sea. I am afraid.

And her father. 'There is no future for us here or in Iran. We will have the life I have told you about. We will be free to live the way we choose. You must believe. There will be happiness and joy for us when we arrive there. I promise you.'

Mahtab tiptoed away. Happiness and joy. Farhad and Soraya, in their room, were sleeping. She watched their bodies shifting slightly with each breath. Did they know? Had her father told them? She felt her way to her room in the darkness and

took down from her bookshelf the rag doll her grandmother had made for her. How long since she had fallen asleep with it beside her on the pillow? She burrowed deep into the mattress, wrapping her arms tightly around the doll, rubbing her cheek against the soft fabric. She pulled the blanket up over her head. It made a dark secret space that no one, nothing could enter.

Chapter Two

COLD, SO COLD.

Mahtab sat on the hard wooden floor of the truck. She was wedged in by furniture, boxes and sacks, her knees caught up under her chin. How long had they been travelling like this? Two hours? Four hours? Six?



It had been night time when they left. Her father shook her awake. 'Mahtab, Mahtab. Get up. We're leaving.'

'What? Where?' She sat up.

'There is a truck outside. We are leaving for Pakistan.'

'Pakistan? All of us?' She leant against him as she pushed aside her blankets and pressed her feet into the soft wool of the carpet.

He shook his head. 'Just us. You, me, Mum, Farhad and Soraya.'

'But Grandma...?'

'Uncle Wahid will look after her. She says she is too old. Get dressed, quickly.'

At the end of the bed were her clothes – two pairs of trousers, a long-sleeved shirt, two jackets, gloves, her warmest boots.

'Put them all on. It's cold where we're going. You'll need them all. And you can't bring anything extra.'

She started to pull on her clothes. Why couldn't she bring her doll, the special book of poems that Grandpa had made, her favourite photos, an extra scarf? He was already gone.

The photo of Leila stared at her from its silver frame. She slipped the photo out and pushed it down into her pocket. She stumbled to the front door like an overdressed clown. Soraya was dozing in their mother's arms and Farhad was beside her, stamping his feet and blowing his warm breath onto his gloved hands. Two suitcases and bags of food leant against the wall.

'Listen carefully.' Her father shook Soraya awake and knelt her on the floor with Farhad and Mahtab.

He looked directly from one to the other. 'You are going to hide in a special part of the truck with Mum. Try to sleep. Sometimes we might stop and you can come out and have a run around to stretch your legs. But, and this is so important, if I bang twice on the wall of the cabin, we are coming to a special checkpoint and you must make no sound. None. Not even a whisper. You understand? If they find you, we are all dead.'

Farhad and Soraya nodded, wide-eyed. Mahtab too. Suddenly she was more awake than ever in her life before. Dead. Her body stiffened. She would not let her breath make a sound as it left her body.

'My brave, brave children.' His hand was shaking as he pushed her hair back from her face and pressed his lips against her forehead.

They crept outside.

Mahtab could just make out the shape of the truck. Beneath a loose tarpaulin were what looked like a table and three wardrobes lashed onto the back with a stack of smaller furniture: chairs, blanket boxes and cabinets. Then there were sacks stuffed full and still more boxes. A man appeared, silent, out of the darkness. He lifted down a heavy sack of grain, held back the tarpaulin and pushed aside a wardrobe. A narrow corridor was revealed between two of the cabinets. Mahtab's mother climbed up, squeezed into the space and disappeared. Farhad and Soraya were

lifted up and Mahtab followed, feeling her way forward. It smelt damp and musty and led to an opening not much bigger than a tabletop. Their bodies bumped and brushed against each other as they settled into sitting positions. The wardrobe was pushed back into place and the tarpaulin dropped down. Their father and the outside world were gone.

Her mother pulled all three of them close. *'God, send your prayers and mercy to the prophet Mohammed and all his followers.'* She kept her arms wrapped around the children as the truck moved forward slowly. Mahtab pressed her eyes tightly closed.



Now she knew why her grandmother had come into the bedroom the night before and sat watching her as she fell asleep, why Grandma bent and kissed her and then returned and did it again. When Mahtab opened her eyes, her grandmother took from her own wrist the bracelet of gold coins, linked with gold chain, and clasped it on Mahtab's wrist. *'So you will always remember,'* she said, and she slipped away.

Where were they driving? Down to the end of the street. She knew that part of the road. Then they turned to the right. That meant they were going past the bazaar and the shops where she used to go with Mum to buy the fruit and vegetables. When they could go out. So long ago now. Were people arriving,

spreading out the trestles covered in golden apples, sweet yellow melons, grapes and mulberries? Then there was the open space and the Friday mosque with its tiles of sky-blue, its patterns of other blues and greens in bands broken by lines of gold. She tried to remember what came next.

She listened for signs that the day had started. Were there other trucks or carts around? Were people walking along the side of the road? She heard the squelching of tyres on gravel, the groaning of gears, and felt the thud of the truck's wheel dropping into a pothole. Nothing more.



Mahtab shifted position and her shoulder struck the corner of a table but she made no sound. She felt her mother's hand gently rubbing on the spot where it hurt.

'Are you all right?' her mother whispered.

'Why didn't we say goodbye to Grandma?'

'She'll understand.'

Farhad and Soraya were quiet beside her. They seemed to sleep but in the dark Mahtab couldn't tell.

Gradually, faint slivers of light seeped through the walls of the truck. Above Mahtab's head were planks of wood and on them were more sacks of grain. What if a bandit with a gun or a checkpoint Talib wanted them taken off and the furniture moved?

What if they wanted to know what lay beneath? Her stomach muscles shivered. Her belly was a stone of ice, solid. Cold breath forced its way through her throat, her nose, her mouth.

'Most of all they want money,' Dad had said.

But what if he was wrong?

'Can we talk?' Farhad stirred.

'Yes,' said his mother, 'but just quietly. This truck is so noisy that I don't think anyone will hear us.'

Mahtab sat silent while Farhad began, 'Will the men in black turbans get us in the mountains?'

'No.'

'Will they be in Pakistan?'

'No.'

'Will we ever see them again?'

'No. Where we are going, we hope that there will be nothing nasty or bad that can ever happen to anyone again.' Mum's hand rested in his hair.

Nothing bad or nasty. No weeping and crying in the houses because someone has been taken by the bands of Taliban carrying guns and whips? No fear that the knock on the door will bring pain and grieving? No whispered conversations that were not meant for children: conversations of beatings and shootings, of disappearing, of hangings and stonings?

Mahtab shivered. She tried to stretch. Her back ached and her neck was sore. Grandma would be

awake now. Mahtab saw her walking slowly room to room then eating her breakfast with Uncle Wahid, Reza and Rasheed. Aunt Mina would be there too. The usual start to the day. Were they wondering where the truck was now? Did they know where exactly the truck was going? In fact, where was the truck going? Mahtab tried to remember the maps she had seen. She knew there were fields and open space around the edge of the town – flat, fertile country, orchards and wheat-fields, easy to drive through. But soon there would be mountains. Huge mountains stretched almost the length of the country. She had never seen them but she knew from the atlas that Pakistan was on the other side. A long, long way on the other side.

Soraya pushed her head against Mahtab's knee. 'How long will we be in here?'

'I don't know,' said Mahtab. 'A long time. Go to sleep.'

'I don't want to.'

'Go to sleep.'

'You can't make me.'

'There's nothing else to do.'

Soraya grew quiet then but Mahtab couldn't sleep. Her mind played over and over the conversations of the past few days. Uncle Wahid at first saying that they must not go and then changing his

mind and saying it was the right thing to do. Aunt Mina, shaking her head and fighting to hold back tears. Grandma urging them on. And then there were her mother's tears at night when she thought no one was listening and her father's words: happiness and joy. She repeated them now, happiness and joy, happiness and joy. In the darkness they felt strangely empty.



She must have slept because she woke to the sound of the truck slowing to a halt. Had there been two bangs on the cabin wall? What was happening?

A door slammed. Boots crunched on gravel. The truck rocked as furniture was shifted and she heard her father's voice. 'Rest time. Stretch your legs. Come out and breathe some fresh air.'

They slid out like strange burrowing creatures coming from their holes to the surface. Their legs wouldn't hold them up properly and they slumped against the body of the truck. Mahtab's eyes hurt in the early-morning light. She squinted and turned away from the glare leaping from flecks of white stone.

'We're in the foothills of the mountains,' her father said. 'Soon we start really climbing.'

'No sign of them?' Mahtab's mother shielded her eyes with her hand, gazing into the distance.

'No. Not yet.'

Mahtab knelt with her mother and father, facing south-west.

'In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Praise be to Allah, Lord of the worlds...'

The words, the rhythms were so familiar. It didn't matter that she was not on the rug at home. Surely they would be all right.



They sat then in the shade of the truck and ate rounds of bread and kebab, dripping meat juice over their chins.

'How far is Pakistan?' Mahtab rolled the last piece of bread into a tube and bit into it.

'Maybe two weeks. We're not going by any main roads. We'll criss-cross all the back ways to avoid people.'

'So we're not going to any towns?'

Her father shook his head. 'Only when we absolutely have to. When our diesel runs low. And you will all stay hidden. We have enough food.'

Two weeks. Two weeks crouched and hiding, body rigid, waiting every minute for the two loud bangs that might come on the cabin wall. Two weeks of fear, of the ice stone in the belly, of holding your breath, of whispering, of blocking from your mind everything you know or have heard of what they can

do. They. Taliban. The whip-carrying men in black turbans. The ones who had been so cruel to her father, to Grandpa...



'I don't want to go back in there.' Soraya buried herself against her mother's legs. 'It's too dark.'

'You have to, little one.' Her mother crouched beside her and rubbed her back. 'It's the only way we can get to Pakistan.'

'It's too dark,' she said again.

'Come on, Soraya.' Farhad took her hand. 'We must be like Ali Baba and this is that special cave and we have to hide in here because the forty thieves might come back. They'll never, ever find us here because it's so dark and we'll hide.'

'And we'll find the treasure.'

'Can you remember?' said Farhad.

'Gold and silver,' said Soraya. 'Lots and lots of coins and carpets and cloth of silk and brocade.'

'Open Sesame,' said Farhad, and their father held the tarpaulin back so they could all enter the dark space.

'Close Sesame,' Soraya instructed as she pushed herself back against the bulky form of her mother.



Darkness again. Now Mahtab felt the truck climbing higher and higher. She leant back against a wardrobe.

Farhad is right, it is like a cave. It's as if we are inside the Earth except that we are bouncing along, hitting potholes and skidding along bits of the surface of the road. She then imagined the Earth doing that – bouncing through space, hitting whatever would be the equivalent of a pothole, bouncing around stars and planets – and she found herself giggling.

Her mother had begun to tell the story of Ali Baba again. She told of the poor man in the forest cutting wood for a living. He sees a great group of horsemen coming towards him and, fearful, he climbs a tree to hide. He realises that there is a huge rock nearby and the horsemen, who he decides are robbers, stop in front of this rock and their leader utters the words 'Open Sesame.' The rock rolls aside and reveals the opening of a cave. The robbers take into the cave all their bags of gold and silver coins and then they come out and go off in the direction they came from. Ali Baba waits for some time and then he decides to try and enter the cave. He utters those magic words, 'Open Sesame,' and the rock flies open and shows that there in the large cavern, lit by holes in the roof, are sacks and sacks of treasure.

'Tell me again what the treasure is,' whispered Soraya.

'Gold...'

Two loud bangs on the wall sounded between them and the cabin.

Mahtab stiffened, snatched her hand up over her mouth.

No sound. Don't make a sound.

The signal.

A checkpoint.

Taliban.

She froze.

The truck's gears ground slowly down and stopped.

She heard the doors open and she pictured her father and the driver getting out. She heard them step away from the truck. Then muffled words.

She pressed her eyes tightly closed. Farhad's hand gripped hers.

'When you are very scared,' her grandfather had said to her once, 'count backwards from a hundred. By the time you get to zero, the worrying moment may have passed.'

One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven, ninety-six... Had her grandfather done this when the Talib smashed through the door of his office and dragged him out? *Ninety-five, ninety-four, ninety-three...* Had he done it when he stood there and heard their accusations? *Ninety-two, ninety-one, ninety...* And had he done this when they raised their whips and struck him and then their guns and shot him dead? What number was she up to? The voices were continuing.

Were they arguing? Would the soldiers not let them through? What story was her father telling them? Would they believe him? Would they know of that time when he was taken before? Of her grandfather?

Boots clomped around the back of the truck. Stones were kicked aside. Something slapped against a tyre. A kick? A swipe from a whip?

A shadow passed in front of the narrow slit that let the sliver of sunlight through.

Mahtab held her breath.

Think of the numbers. Which was it again? Eighty-nine, eighty-eight, eighty-seven...

Soraya stirred. She stretched away from her mother and the tiny bracelet on her wrist scraped against wood. To Mahtab, it sounded as if wild horses were dragging chains across the bare ground. Her mother felt inside her robe and taking a cube of sugar, pressed it to Soraya's lips. This was the sign they'd arranged: suck quietly on the sugar and don't make a sound. She passed one each to Farhad and Mahtab. Even as she rolled the sugar around her mouth, Mahtab felt the sound of grains on her teeth was deafening. Surely they could be heard.

The truck doors slammed. The engine started. Her father's feet stomping against the floor set up a vibration that blocked the shaking of the truck.

Mahtab felt her whole body go loose. Every muscle had been tense, tight, and now it was as if the wind had suddenly died and she was a kite dropping lifeless to the ground.

Her mother squeezed her hand. 'Thank God, thank God, we are saved, this time.'

Mahtab wanted to giggle, to speak of anything, to fill the space they were in with words, any words. She looked from her mother to her little sister and brother.

Tears filled his eyes. As they streamed down his cheeks, he pressed his hand to his mouth and was silent.



After about twenty minutes the truck stopped again. This time there was no banging or warning noises from her father. He came to the side of the truck and pushed aside the tarpaulin and the furniture.

'Come on,' he said. 'Stretch-your-legs time again.' He pulled Mahtab down by her feet. 'How are you? Are you all right?'

She tried to stand but her legs wouldn't hold her. She fell against the back of the truck as her mother slid out and collapsed in a heap on the ground.

The air was fresh and cold. Mountain peaks disappeared into cloud. Patches of snow, only metres above them, lay as if carelessly tossed there by a

passing traveller. Mahtab stared. One day Grandpa had taken down a book and shown her a picture like this. 'This is our country too,' he'd said. 'One day you may see it and know that not everything is in the towns or in villages. There are wild and beautiful places out there.'

The wind whipped the burqa over her mother's shoulders as she balanced, unsteady. She drank quickly from the water flask. 'How much did that checkpoint cost us?'

'A lot.' Dad frowned. Then he grinned, a sight Mahtab had not seen for a long time. 'But not everything. We have enough for the next one. Now it is time to pray.'