

How Omran Daqneesh, 5, Became a Symbol of Aleppo's Suffering

By Anne Barnard

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BEIRUT, Lebanon — In the images, he sits alone, a small boy coated with gray dust and encrusted blood. His little feet barely extend beyond his seat. He stares, bewildered, shocked and, above all, weary, as if channeling the mood of Syria.

The boy, identified by medical workers as Omran Daqneesh, 5, was pulled from a damaged building after a Syrian government or Russian airstrike in the northern city of Aleppo. He was one of 12 children under the age of 15 treated on Wednesday — not a particularly unusual figure — at one of the hospitals in the city's rebel-held eastern section, according to doctors there.

But some images strike a particular nerve, for reasons both obvious and unknowable, jarring even a public numbed to disaster. Omran's is one.

Within minutes of being posted by witnesses and journalists, a photograph and a video of Omran began rocketing around the world on social media. Unwittingly, Omran — like Alan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler who drowned last September and whose body washed up on a Turkish beach — is bringing new attention to the thousands upon thousands of children killed and injured during five years of war and the inability or unwillingness of global powers to stop the carnage.

Maybe it was his haircut, long and floppy up top; or his rumpled T-shirt showing the Nickelodeon cartoon character CatDog; or his tentative, confused movements in the video. Or the instant and inescapable question of whether either of his parents was left alive.

In any event, by Thursday morning, Omran's image had been broadcast and published around the world, and Syrians were sharing mock-ups of his photograph in memes that both cried for help and darkly mocked the futile repetitiveness of such pleas.

One, riffing on Omran's officelike chair, showed him at a desk as if representing his country to the world.

Another pasted him like a silent accusation between President Obama and his Russian counterpart, President Vladimir V. Putin.

The drafting of Omran as an emblem of despair is not new; images of dead and injured children from Syria are shared daily on social media, many of them indescribably more harrowing. Pieces of children's bodies being pulled from rubble are photographed with appalling regularity in a war of indiscriminate attacks, most often from government airstrikes and shelling but also from rebel mortars.

But while the mind revolts against looking too long at those pictures, and many news media shun them as too gruesome, it may be the relatively familiar look of Omran's distress that allows a broader public to relate to it.

In the case of Alan, the Syrian toddler who washed up on a beach after his family tried to reach Europe on a smuggler's boat, the child was dead. But his body was intact, lying in the sand as if sleeping, and dressed neatly with evident parental love for his big journey.

Omran, as he is carried from a damaged building in the dark, could be Everychild. He looks around in confusion, his chubby forearm draped trustingly across the reflective stripe on his rescuer's back, before he is plopped into the chair at the back of an ambulance, lit blindingly white.

He settles into a thousand-yard stare, apparently too stunned to cry. Then he puts a hand to his bloody brow, looks at his palm in surprise, and tries to wipe it on the chair. He glances around, as if trying to understand where he is.

Omran's picture and video were distributed by the Aleppo Media Center, a longstanding group of antigovernment activists and citizen journalists who document the conflict. They were also shared with journalists by doctors from the hospital where he was treated, which is supported by the Syrian American Medical Society.

The video shows two more small children brought to the ambulance, and then two adults. They were taken to a hospital already swamped with casualties.

Mohammad al-Ahmad, a radiology nurse, was in the emergency room when Omran arrived around 9 p.m. with bruises and cuts all over his body.

"The boy was traumatized," Mr. Ahmad said. "He wasn't speaking when he arrived. A few minutes later, he started crying from pain."

Mr. Ahmad cleaned Omran's face and bandaged his head, as images shared by the hospital's medical staff showed. Doctors said they found no apparent signs of brain injury.

In the chaos, the hospital workers, who communicated via online messages, could not immediately say which of the boy's adult relatives were alive and whether they were with him.

That is not unusual, medical workers say, in a city where some dead and injured children cannot even be identified because they are brought in alone. Bombings bring so many patients at once that doctors treat them on the floor, and hospitals and medical workers

have been systematically targeted in the war.

Later, doctors at the hospital said they had verified that Omran's parents had survived, though their home had been destroyed. Relatives declined to speak, saying they were afraid of government reprisals. The doctors said the family may have relatives living in government-controlled territory.

Mahmoud Raslan, who had taken some of the video and photographs of Omran, said in an interview that the boy lived with his mother, father and three siblings, and that they were all injured.

Cases like Omran's are a daily sight in eastern Aleppo, several doctors said, adding that he was lucky in that he made it to a hospital that was still open.

Mr. Ahmad, the nurse, said three other children had been hospitalized with Omran, along with a 22-year-old man who had been stuck under rubble for eight hours. He said that at least three people had died in the strike.

"But Omran took all the attention," he said.

Mr. Raslan, the photographer, was surprised that the images of this one boy drew so much news coverage when, he said, he photographs similar events every day.

On Thursday morning, journalists from around the world were clamoring in an online chat group for more information about Omran and his family. But the doctors had moved on.

They were handling yet another influx from a bombing that morning, later posting new images. A boy lay on the floor, his legs missing. A woman in black put her hand to her mouth in anguish.

Another boy lay on a gurney, soaked in blood, as a clinician worked on him. A few minutes later came another text message: The boy had died. His name was Ibrahim Hadiri, and there was a new photograph of his face, eyes closed. It is not likely to go viral.

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