

UN Staffer Saved by Lie in Afghan Massacre

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Afghans watching smoke billow over a UN compound torched by a mob in Mazar-i-Sharif. Only a Dari-speaking Russian survived the brutal attack.

In Russia, hardly anyone knows Pavel Yershov, a career diplomat with the UN's Afghan mission. But his name resonated worldwide after he emerged the sole survivor of a violent attack on the UN compound he headed in the Afghan town of Mazar-i-Sharif.

He survived by convincing his attackers — in their own language — that he was Muslim.

But others on the compound were not so lucky. Among the dead were three UN workers, four Nepal-born UN security guards and two dozen Afghans, including two who were beheaded.

What began as a peaceful demonstration by Muslims protesting the burning of a Quran by a U.S. pastor disintegrated into a massacre after a group of armed Taliban fighters incited the crowd to attack the UN compound on Friday, the UN's chief envoy in Afghanistan, Staffan

de Mistura, told reporters.

Local police were caught "by surprise" and failed to stop the crowd, while the UN's own guards were helpless because they had orders not to fire at civilians, de Mistura said Saturday, according to a [transcript](#) of his remarks published on the United Nations' web site.

At least four Nepal-born guards were killed, he said.

Yershov and the three other UN workers stationed at the mission fled to a bunker at the compound. When the angry mob broke into the bunker, Yershov was the first to greet them, speaking in Dari — one of two main languages of Afghanistan.

"He spoke the language and tried to draw their attention on himself," de Mistura said, The Associated Press reported.

Yershov lied to them, saying he was also a Muslim, which is why he was let go, although only after a savage beating, de Mistura said.

The mob pulled the other three UN workers out of the bunker and killed them, shooting two dead and slashing the throat of the third.

The three victims were Joakim Dungel, 33, a human rights officer from Sweden, Siri Skare, 53, a military liaison officer from Norway, and Filaret Motco, 43, a political officer from Romania, the UN said.

In total, about two dozen people were reportedly killed in the violence. Two were beheaded.

Three Afghan workers from the compound managed to save themselves by blending in with the crowd and then fleeing.

Yershov's condition is "quite satisfactory," and he is staying at home, not in the hospital, Stepan Anikeyev, a spokesman for the Russian Embassy in Kabul, told Channel One television on Friday. He did not elaborate on Yershov's location.

Little information is available on Yershov's background, but scarce media reports indicate that he was a staff diplomat with Russia's embassy in Afghanistan before joining the UN.

In an odd twist, his story rings a bell with Russians familiar with the life of 19th-century writer and diplomat Alexander Griboyedov, whose career was cut short when a mob of religious fanatics attacked the Russian Embassy in what is now Iran in 1829, killing everyone. Griboyedov's sole literary work, "Woe from Wit," is a staple in Russian schools.

In Moscow, the Foreign Ministry [condemned](#) Friday's attack and called on Afghanistan's government and international forces to protect UN employees.

But marches and violent protests continued across Afghanistan over the weekend. On Sunday, police used machine guns to stop a ravaging mob from breaking into a UN mission in Kandahar, where the death toll from the riots exceeded 100, RIA-Novosti [reported](#).

The Taliban insurgency said in a statement Sunday that Afghans were ready to die in protest

of the sacrilege of Islam's holy book.

But Terry Jones, the Florida pastor whose decision to burn a Quran last month triggered the riots, remained unrepentant, news reports said. He refused to accept any blame and announced plans to stage a mock trial for the Prophet Muhammad later this month — in what he called an attempt to expose the religion's inhuman nature.

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