



**BRAVED DEATH TO SAVE OTHERS**

**HERO OF OUR TIME**

Pakistani coach driver Meher Mohammad Khalil

He's been called a hero for saving the lives of the Sri Lankan cricket team, keeping a cool head and driving his bus to safety when it came under a gun and grenade attack. Driver Meher Mohammad Khalil says he did it for Pakistan. "The thought that the Sri Lankans are guests and my country's image will be ruined if any of the players got seriously hurt spurred me," Khalil said. "I kept my foot on the accelerator and drove the bus." Khalil was behind the wheel when gunmen attacked the convoy.

"The vehicle slowed at the roundabout when I saw two men come out of hiding and start shooting," he said. "There was continuous firing and then suddenly a man jumped in front of the bus and hurled a grenade towards us. But luckily it missed and I drove in between the security vehicles and safely took the bus to the stadium." Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani Wednesday announced a reward of 500,000 rupees (about 6,280 dollars) for Khalil, who showed "bravery and presence of mind at the time of firing," his office said.

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bringing the Sri Lankan team to the stadium in Lahore on Tuesday. Eight people were killed, but none of the players suffered serious injury. "It was shocking and then I heard Sri Lankan players shouting 'Go! Go!' and I did my best to take them to safety," Khalil told AFP at the stadium, from where his charges were dramatically airlifted to safety by the air force. "Had we stopped a rocket-launcher would have hit us," the 42-year-old said. "That could have been disastrous." Up to a dozen men — armed with grenades, a rocket-launcher and automatic weapons — besieged the Sri Lankan team bus barely half a mile from the Gaddafi Stadium where they were due to start the third day's play in the second Test.

Sri Lankan captain Mahela Jayawardene and manager Brandon Kuruppu were also full of praise for the driver. "I was on the phone from Sri Lanka when I saw men coming towards us and started firing. It could have been worse but all praise to the driver who kept his cool and drove us out of danger," said Kuruppu. Jayawardene said Khalil was the saviour. "He did not think for his life. He was wise enough to keep driving and took us to the stadium. It could have been fatal," the skipper said. Spin maestro Muttiah Muralitharan said Khalil was brilliant. "I am standing in front of you just because of the driver," said Muralitharan, who gave his Sri Lankan shirt to Khalil as a thank you. LAHORE, Pakistan, Thursday AFP

**WE OWE OUR LIVES TO HIM - MAHELA**

The attack was swift and brazen, the gunmen appeared well-trained but, though eight people were killed including six policemen — a greater calamity seems to have been averted by providence, unexploded bombs and the bus driver's presence of mind. Mahela Jayawardene later credited him with "saving our lives". The attack began at the 42-seater bus approached the upmarket Liberty Square, towards the end of its 10-kilometre journey to the stadium. The driver, Mohammad Khalil, says he was intercepted by a white car as he was about to turn at the roundabout and the gunman — a dozen, say officials — emerged from behind trees and opened fire in a sophisticated, coordinated attack. Television footage showed several gunmen creeping through trees, crouching to aim their weapons and then running onto the next target. First, they aimed at the bus tyres, at the sound of the shooting, the Sri Lankan players and staff hit the floor of

the bus to escape the sniper fire. Khalil followed his instinct and jammed hard on the accelerator. "When the firing started one of the players shouted 'go, go!' and somehow I kept my cool, ducked and sped the bus towards the stadium." The momentum probably saved those on board, because though the bus was hit by 25 bullets, it avoided the heavier ammunition — a rocket, which landed on the road and several grenades, which failed to explode. Mahela Jayawardene said later: "We owe the team bus driver our lives for his remarkable bravery in the face of direct gunfire. Had he not had the courage and presence of mind to get the bus moving after the initial attack then we'd have been a far easier target for the terrorists." The area then turned into a battlefield as security forces returned fire. The commanders

traveling in front of and behind the team bus got into action, drawing the terrorists' fire and allowing the bus to head for the stadium. Australian freelance cameraman Tony Bennett said people inside the stadium heard explosions followed by bursts of machine gun fire. "Next thing we knew, the Sri Lankan team bus rolls up being sprayed by bullets. Players were getting carried into the dressing room." Once at the stadium, most of the Sri Lankan players stayed inside the dressing-room. A few tried to get on with normality; Dilhara Fernando stayed onto the balcony, talking on his cell phone and Muttiah Muralitharan calmed himself down with a cup of tea. As senior PCB official's planned the team's evacuation, the former Pakistan wicketkeeper Wasim

Bari, now the PCB's Human Resource officer, named Thilash Samarawera and Tharanga Paranavithana to the Services Hospital. Back at the ambush site the gunmen had, incredibly, all managed to escape but had left behind evidence of the scale of their attack. Security experts defused two car bombs and recovered a stash of weapons including grenades, three kilograms of explosives, a pistol and a detonating cable. Broken glass littered the road next to a gun cartridge and an empty rocket-propelled grenade launcher. Blood stained the front seats of a vehicle used by Pakistan's elite force, the van raked with gunfire with its wheels shot up and radio system disabled. Soon after, the players were on the move again — this time by helicopter, to a military air base and then onward to Abu Dhabi and Colombo. (C) Oxfam



Relatives escort Pakistani coach driver Meher Mohammad Khalil (C), driver of the Sri Lankan cricket team bus, after paying tribute to the victims at the site of the deadly ambush on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore on 3/3. Khalil has been called a hero for saving the lives of the Sri Lankan cricket team, keeping a cool head and driving his bus to safety when it came under a gun and grenade attack. AFP