

Title: Life and death in Darfur: Sudan's refugee crisis continues

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Full Text:

DARFUR, Sudan -- Fifteen-year-old Sumaya will never forget the day two years ago when a horseman militia known as the Janjaweed terrorized her village in Darfur, a region of Sudan. "I was at school when they attacked us," she told a United Nations (U.N.) aid worker. "My sisters ran back to the village, and I ran with some friends. My cousin Mona was running ahead of me when she was shot. I stopped and held her hand. When she died, her hand slipped out of mine. Some boys told me that I had to run, so I did."

Along the way, Sumaya found her grandmother and her 4-year-old brother, Mozamel, whom she calls Baba. She clutched the toddler in her arms and started running. "We ran ... until I felt that I couldn't go on any longer," she recalls. As Baba grew heavier and heavier in the girl's arms, she thought about stashing him in the tall grass, but their grandmother insisted that they stay together.

Two harrowing weeks passed before Sumaya, Baba, and their grandmother were reunited with the children's parents and five other brothers and sisters. Together, they walked more than 90 miles to Kalma Camp, a shelter in South Darfur for people who have fled the violence of the Sudanese government forces and the Janjaweed.

More than 70,000 refugees live in Kalma Camp. (A refugee is a person who flees to escape war or a natural disaster.) The U.N. reports that more than 1.8 million people have fled their homes and relocated to camps in Darfur, and more than 200,000 have fled across the border into eastern Chad. An estimated 180,000 people have died during the crisis, most from disease or hunger. The United Nations has described the situation in Darfur as the "world's worst humanitarian crisis."

A History of Violence

The conflict began in early 2003, after years of strife between nomadic Arab herders and non-Arab black African farmers over the region's scarce arable land. The African farmers protested the herders' attacks to Sudan's Arab-controlled government, but the government did nothing. Darfur's African inhabitants claim that the government unfairly supports Arabs in the region.

After two African rebel groups attacked government targets in Darfur, the government responded with air raids and troops to crush the uprising. The government also enlisted the help of Arab militias to fight the rebels. (Militias are fighting groups that aren't formal elements of an army.) Although the Sudanese government denies that it supports the Janjaweed, human rights organizations dispute that claim.

Many such groups, as well as the U.S. government, have accused Sudan of genocide, the systematic killing of an entire racial, political, religious, or cultural group.

In April 2004, the African Union (A.U.) brokered a cease-fire between rebel groups and government forces, but fighting quickly erupted again. The A.U. currently has a team of 7,000 peacekeeping forces in Darfur to protect civilians, but they are unable to stop the violence. The A.U. recently requested that the United Nations oversee peacekeeping in the region. A U.N. force is scheduled to take over the mission in September.

The Sudanese government objected to the deployment of U.N. forces in Darfur. Sudan's president, Omar el-Bashir, warned that Darfur would be a "graveyard" for the international force. Thousands of Sudanese took to the streets of Khartoum, the capital, with signs reading "Death to invaders."

From Bad to Worse

A recent surge in violence worries aid organizations. The Janjaweed have begun attacking camps in neighboring Chad. "You may have thought the terrible situation in Darfur couldn't get worse, but it has," says Peter Takirambudde of Human Rights Watch. "Sudan's policy of arming militias ... is spilling over the border, and civilians have no protection from their attacks, in Darfur or in Chad."

As a result, aid workers are unable to reach refugee camps, and many fear for their lives. That means hundreds of thousands of people will go without food or supplies. "We're losing ground every day in the humanitarian operation, which is a lifeline for more than 3 million people," says Jan Egeland, the U.N.'s top relief official.

Dreaming of Better Days

At Kalma Camp, Sumaya worries about her siblings. They are sick, bleary-eyed,, and listless. Baba has constant stomach pains.

Still, Sumaya says she likes to think about good things. She is thankful that her parents are alive and that she is able to attend school at the camp. She daydreams about her family's farm and about the day she will be able to return home.

Consider This ...

Do powerful countries such as the United States have a moral obligation to help the people of Sudan? Why or why not?

Get Talking

Have students to locate Sudan and the region of Darfur on a world map. Tell students that hundreds of thousands of people are living in refugee camps in Darfur and neighboring Chad.

Direct students to look at the image of the young refugee on the cover. Ask: What might life in a refugee camp be like?

Notes Behind the News

* There are approximately 14,000 aid workers in Darfur and neighboring Chad. The United Nations recently announced that it is cutting relief work in Darfur because it is too violent there for aid workers. The U.N. reduced its budget for Darfur by 44 percent for 2006.

* Many news articles explain the crisis in Darfur as primarily an Arab-African conflict. According to Human Rights Watch, however, that is an oversimplification. The group points out that there are many large Arab tribes in Darfur who have not participated in the conflict. The Janjaweed militias allegedly recruited by the Sudanese government are mainly drawn from several small nomadic Arab tribes who historically have no access to land and migrated into Darfur from Chad in the 1980s. The rebel groups are drawn from three main ethnic groups: the Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit, all of which are considered non-Arab tribes.

* Though the humanitarian groups and the United States government have accused the Sudanese government of genocide, the United Nations has said that Sudanese officials are only guilty of war crimes.

Doing More

* Have students research Sudan's rich ancient history and culture. Ask: What role did the Nile play in shaping Sudan's history and culture?

* The United States is the largest humanitarian donor to Sudan, contributing more than \$1 billion in assistance. Have students research U.S. policy on Sudan at the U.S. State Department's Web site: www.state.gov/p/af/ci/su/

Link It

BBC Special Report on Sudan: news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/africa/2004/sudan

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