

On the ground with Darfur refugees

The UUA president reports from a fact-finding trip to African region of ethnic violence.

By [William G. Sinkford](#)

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More than 200,000 refugees from the murderous ethnic violence of the Darfur region of Sudan are now living in camps in neighboring Chad, and they have chilling stories to tell. This is the story that one of them, Yabul Abdul Omar, the director of a primary school before he fled, told me on my visit last week to the Kounoungo camp in the eastern part of this impoverished African country:

“It was early in the morning and I was at school with my students,” Omar said through an interpreter. “First, the village was surrounded by the Janjaweed [Arab nomads armed by the Sudanese government] on horseback. Then the Antonovs [Russian-manufactured warplanes operated by the Sudanese army] came and bombed the village. They dropped burning chemicals. On the FM radio frequency I heard the pilots coordinating the attack with the horsemen on the ground.

“Many of my students were killed. I could not protect them. The Janjaweed shot many villagers, stole our animals, raped the young girls, and burned the village. Many died. Some of us escaped by crawling in the wadi [dry river bed] and made our way to the Chadian border, where we received assistance from local villagers. Three months later the NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] arrived, and we moved to this camp. I have one wife and six children with me, but two wives and one son remained in Darfur. I do not know where they are or if they are well.”

Omar, in his mid-40s and handsome with a salt-and-pepper Van Dyke beard, has taken responsibility for the elementary school in the Kounoungo camp, which is only 100 miles south of the Sahara and whose sandy soil give shoes and clothing a perpetual coat of dust. He was one of several dozen refugees in three Chadian camps whose stories I learned as part of a joint fact-finding visit of the Unitarian



A Christian Children's Fund staff member with refugee women. Photo by Danielle Sinkford. (Danielle Sinkford)

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An alliance of faith-based, humanitarian, and human rights organizations (including the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations and the UU Service Committee) formed to raise public awareness and to mobilize efforts to help.

Universalist Association of Congregations and the UU Service Committee. Others on the trip were Charlie Clements, the UUSC president; Atema Eclai, the UUSC program director; and my daughter Danielle, our official photographer/recorder.

Our goal was to gain first-hand experience of the tragedy in that part of Africa, which President Bush and the United States Congress have declared genocide, as part of our continuing effort to raise awareness of Unitarian Universalists in their pursuit of issues of peace and justice. My arrest last year while protesting at the Sudanese embassy in Washington was another part of this commitment.

The stories we heard were remarkably consistent. Unprovoked and coordinated attacks by aircraft of the Sudanese army and the Janjaweed on the ground. Homemade gasoline-based napalm dropped from planes. Theft of livestock and property. Rape. Killing. And escape for those lucky enough to cross the Chadian border, often with only the clothes on their backs. Whether these attacks rise to the level of genocide may be a matter of debate. That crimes against humanity have been committed is without doubt.

This was my first experience in refugee camps, and I came expecting to witness a desperate situation: starving children, anger and frustration, idleness and military-like control. What we found was quite different. The camps have been in operation for more than a year and a half. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees supervises the camps, and a multiplicity of humanitarian organizations--known collectively as nongovernmental organizations or NGOs--provide supplies and services. There is food and water. We saw additional wells being dug by one of the NGOs to provide potable water both to the camp and the "host community" of Goz Beida, which is on the southern part of the border of Chad and Sudan. Many families have combined the tents provided with more traditional African dwellings of adobe, with thatched roofs. Elementary schools and Qur'anic schools are operating. Medical care is provided at health centers in each camp. Although the supplies and services are not all that the refugees wish, these are functioning communities with leadership in place.

The camps' relations with the host communities are somewhat strained. The Chadian villages along the border welcomed the refugees and supported them for some months until the international humanitarian effort began. But Chad is one of the poorest nations on Earth, without sufficient resources to provide for the influx of refugees. Now some local residents resent the fact that, save for being dispossessed of their homes, the refugees live at a higher standard of living than they do. The resentment manifests itself in many ways. In these Muslim societies it is women's work to go out and gather firewood for cooking. NGO representatives and refugees themselves explained to us that women are often harassed and beaten and occasionally raped as they go farther and farther afield for firewood. It is important to remember that one host community of 7,000 persons (Goz Beida) now has 15,000 refugees living next door, on their land.

What all of the refugees want is to return to their homes. As one man put it, "Our ancestors are buried in Darfur. We must return." Women were also unanimous in their desire to return home. One woman said simply, "This country is not for us." But a return seems far in the future. The violence continues in Darfur. In fact, it seems to be

intensifying. In addition to continuing attacks by the Janjaweed, two rebel groups--the Sudanese Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement--are now fighting one another. Bandits have free rein in the midst of the chaos. The few NGOs operating in Darfur have recently been instructed to have their people travel only by helicopter--the roads are simply too dangerous. Last week an NGO vehicle was hijacked just north of one of the camps we visited.

The Sudanese government, in an attempt to create the impression of stability, has created a few "model villages" where a school, a medical facility, and perhaps a water system have been built. Refugees have been invited to resettle in these locations. But there have been no takers because these sites are surrounded by settlements of the nomadic Janjaweed.

Today, the African Union is the only peacekeeping force on the ground in Sudan. But the AU is neither chartered nor resourced to deal with the escalating violence; its troops are there only to protect observers. And two weeks ago, with the Bush administration struggling to find money to rebuild our own Gulf Coast and pay for the ongoing occupation of Iraq, U.S. support for even that modest AU role was cut significantly. The refugees are clear--"We need the UN," many said--but for that to happen it will take pressure from Western nations and, if possible, China and Russia.

The movement of refugees across the border into Chad, which had slowed to a trickle, has recently accelerated. An overflow camp (Gaga) was created several months ago and has remained unfilled. Last week that camp began receiving about 30 refugees a day, a rate of 1,000 a month if it continues.

The path to peace is unclear. Desertions from the Chadian military among units sent to the border with Sudan raise questions about the stability of the Chadian government. President Bashir of Sudan remains under pressure. The attention of the developed world is drawn to the earthquake in Pakistan and hurricanes in the United States. Meanwhile, life in the camps goes on, and among the refugees the desire for a return to their homes remains simply a dream.

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