



Jane Magazine
Letter from Darfur, Emily Holland
 August 2007 Issue



letter from darfur

TIMELINE →

February 2003

Fighting breaks out among the Sudanese government forces, the Janjaweed mercenary militia and two rebel groups—the

Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement. The rebels say the Darfur region is being marginalized.

April 2003

People begin to flee Darfur for eastern Chad and Sudanese refugee camps. The Janjaweed militia attack them.

September 2003

Cease-fire. The SLA and the government agree to a deal, but it is short-lived.

December 2003

The Janjaweed attack villagers, and 30,000 new refugees leave for Chad, where almost 100,000 refugees reside.

April 8, 2004

A new cease-fire lasts 45 days, and hundreds of thousands of refugees get aid from humanitarian groups.

May 4, 2004

The U.N. names Darfur to be one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world.

May 22, 2004

The Sudanese government and rebel groups blame one another for an attack killing at least 56 people in Abga Rajil.



July 17, 2004

Peace talks disintegrate when rebel groups demand that the Sudanese government disarm the Janjaweed.

July 30, 2004

The U.N. also demands that the government of Sudan disarm the Janjaweed.

Dec. 13, 2004

Two aid workers are killed, and the U.N. temporarily suspends relief operations in South Darfur.

March 28, 2005

Fifteen military and security officials are arrested on charges of murder, rape and burning villages.

April 14, 2006

Chad breaks diplomatic ties with Sudan and threatens to expel the 200,000 Darfuri refugees living in its desert camps.

November 2006

A fight in Malakal between former rebels and the Sudanese army kills 150.

March 31, 2007

In the border villages of Tiero and Marena, the Janjaweed kills up to 400 people.

May 29, 2007

The U.S. announces sanctions targeting Sudanese companies and individuals involved in the violence in Darfur.

murder the men, rape the women

Darfur's war-torn borders are closed, but with the help of the International Rescue Committee, Emily Holland gets through to meet the women living in hell on earth.

ILLUSTRATION BY OLAF HAJEK

A WOMAN SITS IN FRONT of me with her glazed-eyed infant resting on her lap. She points to her breasts and says, "I have no milk to feed my baby. I am so hungry. We have no shelter—not even plastic to cover our heads." I am at Otash Camp in Darfur, Sudan, one of the many sprawling tracts to which displaced Darfuris flee, and I'm amazed at how many women in their 20s and 30s have similarly heart-wrenching stories.

"My village was attacked and burned," says another. "I fled and gave birth in the driving rain." →



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HOW TO HELP

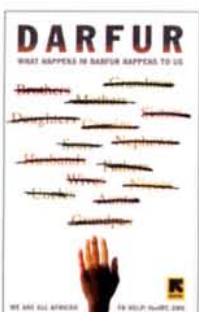
Genocide Intervention Network

This organization makes you feel like, "Holy crap, I can do something." Started by Swarthmore students in 2004, GI-Net works with an African group that protects women's safety while they gather firewood. If you want to help convince Congress to make ending genocide in Darfur a higher priority, call 800-GENOCIDE.

A GI-Net rep will coach you on what to say, then connect you with a Congress member's office near you. Learn more at genocideintervention.net.

International Rescue Committee

The IRC delivers life-saving aid, protects women and speaks out on behalf of the Sudanese people. To learn more or to donate, visit theirc.org. And make sure you sign the petition to stop violence against women (www.theirc.org/stopviolence), before they deliver it to Congress next month. Doesn't get much easier than that.



DARFUR, WIKIPEDIA-STYLE

Darfur is a region in western Sudan with a population of about 7 million. More than four years of fighting between the Janjaweed militias and rebel groups have left around 200,000 dead. Sudan is one of the poorest countries in the world, with severe shortages of food and clean water. More than 200 sexual assaults were reported by the IRC in the vicinity of Kalma Camp over a five-week period in August 2006.

→ The last woman barely looks at me. Her raw pain is evident when she whispers, "I lost my youngest child when we ran. I haven't been able to find him." I cut the interview short. She is crying.

As in-house producer for the International Rescue Committee (IRC), I write, shoot and produce films and articles to bring attention to underreported crises and displaced peoples. I have come to this war-devastated region to try to capture the experience of Sudanese life amid what has been called the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The conflict here pits rebel groups against mercenary militias known as the Janjaweed. Caught in the cross fire are civilians: Over the past four years, more than 200,000 have been killed and 2 million pushed into camps. Four million now depend on humanitarian assistance to survive—but organizations like mine are targeted, attacked and prevented from reaching these people.

A boy in dishwasher-colored rags with a badly burned hand scratches drawings of warplanes and AK-47s in the sand. He stands up, points at his sister's necklace and says, "It will protect her if the bad people return."

An anti-rape zone

In Zalingei, West Darfur, my IRC colleague Asma, 26, has one of the most dangerous jobs: helping women who have been sexually assaulted in a region where even saying "rape" can land one in jail.

On this day, 200 women are due at the center Asma runs. The place buzzes with chatter and tinny music from a boom box. "Do you like it here?" I ask a young woman whose arms are covered with scars.

She nods and says, "It's my first time. The other women told me it was a nice, safe place."

It's difficult to know how many women are raped in Darfur, both because the number is staggering and rapes are underreported. For the victim, rape entails much more than a brutal assault, Asma tells me: "There's little chance of proving an attack or obtaining medical care. Rape is especially hard for young girls." I learn that after being raped, they're considered damaged goods. Their lives are over.

At the IRC's women's centers, traumatized women reclaim their bodies. The centers offer medical care, counseling and classes in which they can make crafts to earn money. They also do singing, drumming and henna body-painting. "When applying henna, she forgets what has happened," Asma explains. "She is with henna only. She enjoys the moment."

Therapeutic drawing is today's scheduled activity. I watch the women sketch blooming flowers and running animals. Asma says, "It's a sign of progress," and shows me earlier depictions of men in camouflage, incinerating huts and firing bullets at stick figures riddled with red marker dots.

"You see this? The red color is coming from this woman," Asma says, pointing to a drawing. "She fell down, these men shot her, and she took her baby and escaped without any clothes."

The women invite me to participate in a henna ceremony. Clusters of women apply the thick paste to one another's bodies. Asma sprays me with a perfume called Cobra. Later, I give Asma some perfume of my own—it makes me smile now to think that somewhere in Darfur, girls are wearing Valentino.

Introducing notions of "justice" and "confidence"

Next I'm off to Kalma Camp, which is home to the IRC's Justice and Confidence Center. There I meet Nada and Fatima, two women who fled their besieged



HEALING ARTS

Clockwise from above: Emily (right) shows off the henna applied by a Darfuri woman; shocking images drawn by people who have been brutally driven from their homes; displaced children play with homemade kites.

villages and are now IRC volunteers, delivering simple messages to camp residents about women's equality and protecting children.

"For the women here, there are many challenges," Nada tells me. "When they go outside to gather firewood, the Janjaweed attack them." I learn that men who wish to remain with their families cannot leave camp or they will be killed, so women do all the dangerous work: fetching water, gathering wood, finding

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jobs to feed their children. They run the gauntlet daily and are resigned to the prospect of rape—which they consider better than losing their husbands.

"Most of the people don't believe human rights exist," Fatima says. "I tell them that human rights are validated in most parts of the world—that they are for everyone, and people are working hard to bring about a better situation. The world is trying."

As I observe what life is like here, I wonder why the world isn't doing more.

Africa eyes

It's time to depart. I look out the airplane window. My last image of Darfur is of a sunrise. A group of women appears. They're wearing brightly colored veils, a striking contrast to the surrounding desolation. They've been collecting firewood, because dawn is the safest time to do so—"safest" being a relative term.

I remember the saying "Africa eyes," referring to a vision people develop about what's important and how they should lead their lives. My Africa eyes are wide open. I ventured into the heart of this humanitarian crisis not knowing what to expect, and I leave with a racing pulse. I vow to do more. For now, I view daybreak as the women of Darfur do: It's another day of challenge, after another night of survival. ■