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Photo Essay
**WESTERN
SAHARA**



SUDAN Crisis in Darfur



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency





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Cover: Sudanese refugees huddle in the relative safety of neighboring Chad.
UNHCR/B. HEGER/DP/TCO-2004

Back cover: Refugees from Sudan's Darfur region have found safety and shelter at Goz-Amer camp in eastern Chad.
UNHCR/H. CAUX/DP/TCO-2004

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19 Where there is a U.N. troop presence, uprooted Liberians are heading home. UNHCR has begun implementing community-agreed projects involving revival of basic services to provide people with modest incomes.



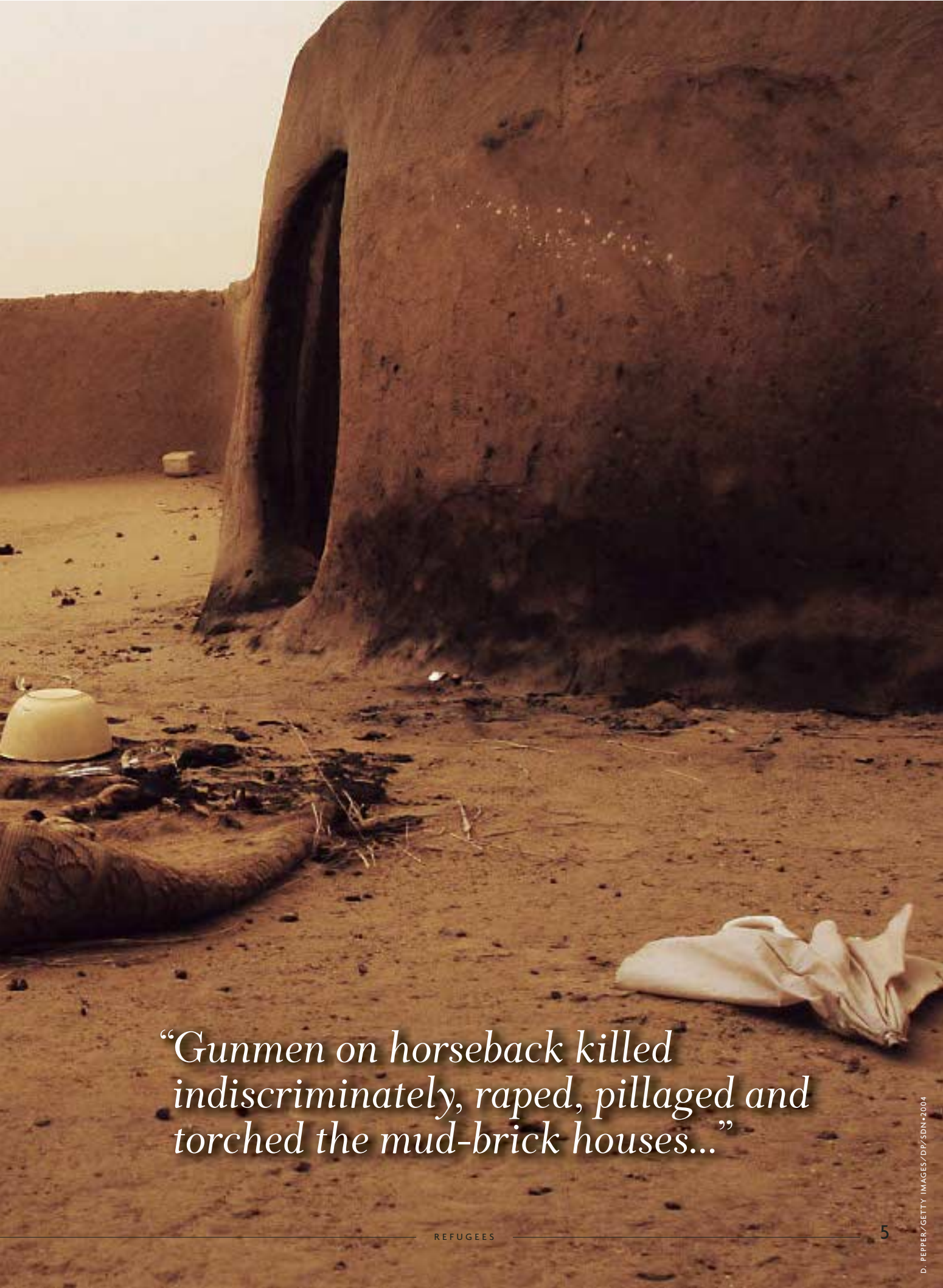
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22 When UNHCR launched its five-day family visit scheme aimed at re-establishing contact between the refugees and their relatives back in Western Sahara, there were tears of joy as well as apprehension at the prospect of reunion.

A photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, a black suitcase lies on the ground. In the middle ground, a white helmet sits on the sand. In the background, there are mud-brick walls. The text "DARFUR Today's worst humanitarian crisis" is overlaid on the image.

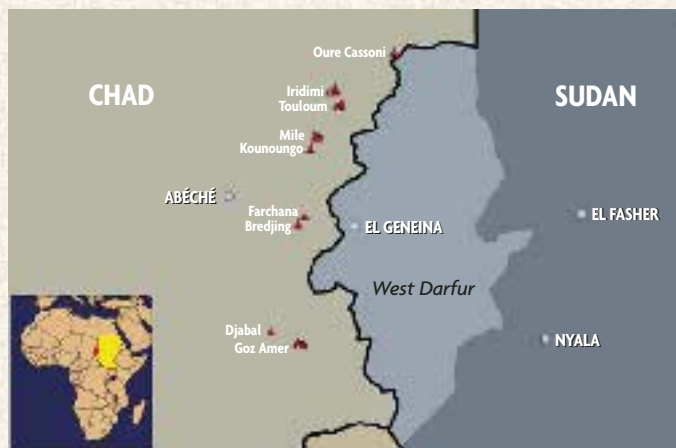
DARFUR

Today's worst humanitarian crisis



“Gunmen on horseback killed indiscriminately, raped, pillaged and torched the mud-brick houses...”

DARFUR TODAY'S WORST HUMANITARIAN CRISIS



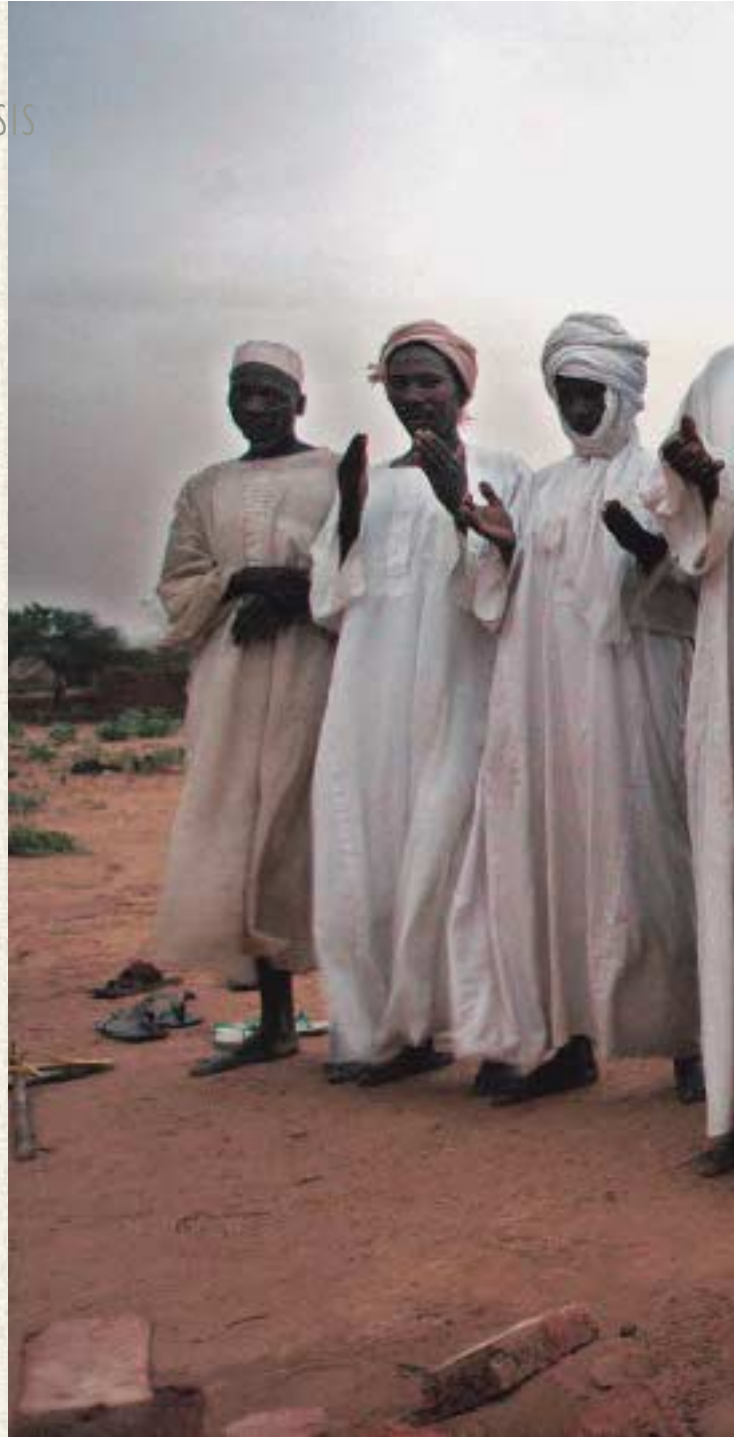
by KITTY MCKINSEY

Clues to the enormity of the death, destruction and sheer terror being wreaked on Sudan's western Darfur region can be read in Babiker Yahya's family 'compound.' The 70-year-old patriarch and five other members of his extended family live in a tiny house built of straw, complete with a thatched gable roof. Twelve other family members live in two shelters just meters away—round knee-high structures the size of a small breakfast table in a European or North American kitchen, with 'walls' of twigs and dead leaves stuck in the sand that do little more than demarcate space in the vast desert. There's no roof on either of these shelters. When the torrential seasonal rains come late at night, all 18 family members rush to a more stable mud-brick home where they huddle tightly with dozens of others and wait for the violent storm to pass.

The fact that Babiker's family prefer their miserable hovels in Dorti camp for displaced people on the outskirts of the West Darfur capital of El Geneina to their intact home and farmlands just a few kilometers away speaks volumes about the horrors they have lived through.

Like more than a million others displaced by 18 months of violence in Darfur, Babiker's family was chased out of their home village of Shariken by gunmen on horseback who killed indiscriminately, raped, pillaged and then torched most of the mud-brick and thatch houses in the village.

Babiker, a thin man with a white beard, wearing a dirty white traditional robe and a tight white cap, says



"THEY RIPPED MY CHILD FROM MY BACK

he buried three of his neighbors who were killed in the attack. Still, he counts himself one of the luckiest men in Darfur. Face to face with one of the horsemen, he survived only because the militiaman's assault rifle malfunctioned.

"He aimed his gun at me," Babiker says, telling his story with lively hand gestures. "He wanted to kill me. I saw him point his gun at me, he prepared the gun to shoot, but the gun wouldn't go off. I grabbed the opportunity to run away." Even though his own house was not burned, Babiker got the message: Shariken village is now off limits. "I am not going back," he says firmly, his arm around the shoulder of one of his



M. LONGARINI/AFIP/GETTY IMAGES/07/5/06/004

AND WHEN THEY SAW HE WAS A BOY, THEY KILLED HIM IN FRONT OF ME.”

granddaughters. “The Arabs will not allow us. If I go back, they will kill me.”

A MAN-MADE CATASTROPHE

Just as peace seems near in the 21-year civil war in southern Sudan, prospects for the safe return home of 500,000 south Sudanese refugees from neighboring countries have been overshadowed by the violence in Darfur, an impoverished area the size of France in the west of Africa’s biggest country.

The U.N. has called Darfur the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, but it’s a man-made one. The *janjaweed* militias are targeting civilians, committing appalling

human rights violations.

Many accounts by witnesses tell similar, horrifying stories. The *janjaweed* roar into the village in pick-up trucks, or on the back of camels and horses. Firing up to 600 rounds a minute from their German G3 assault rifles, they kill the men, steal the animals that are the Darfurians’ wealth, and loot the homes. As the coup de grâce to make sure victims will not be eager to return to the site of this terror, the attackers systematically rape the women and burn homes, leaving most villages nothing more than charred ruins.

The countryside is largely empty of inhabitants. Those chased out of their homes—well over half the pop-



UNHCR HAS A PARTICULARLY UNENVIABLE ASSIGNMENT—TO PROTECT DISPLACED PEOPLE

ulation of 1.7 million—now take refuge in miserable makeshift camps clustered around the region's main cities. As of mid-August, some 180,000 Darfurians had fled to neighboring Chad, where UNHCR has established refugee camps to care for most of them.

Sudan's government says it is fighting a rebellion that began in February 2003, when two groups (the Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement) took up arms to protest what they saw as economic marginalization of Darfur by Khartoum.

HORROR UPON HORROR

Across Darfur's devastated countryside, horror has piled on horror, beyond the grotesque imagination of any demented Hollywood scriptwriter.

Hawa Ishaq, a young mother who guesses she might be about 20, was nearly nine months pregnant with her second child when the *janjaweed* came to her village of Kaileik in West Darfur. "They beat me until I suffered a miscarriage," she says, sorrow written all over her face. To compound her tragedy, her first child, a baby girl, died when she and her husband—both his arms broken—reached Kas town.

"They ripped my (four-year-old) child from my back and when they saw he was a boy, they killed him in front of me," says Kaltum Haroun, another Kaileik villager. "I wanted to carry my dead child with me and bury him," she says. "They wouldn't even let me pick up his body."

But the worst was to come. "Then I saw my brother and my husband shot in front of me," Kaltum continues.



F. ZIZOLA/MAGNUM PHOTOS/DF/SDN004

IN A REGION WHERE ALMOST NO PLACE IS SAFE.

“I had to leave my husband’s body behind too. I couldn’t even do anything.” The bandits stole all her clothes and she fled, naked, walking nine hours to the relative safety of Kas town. Tragically, her one remaining child, a baby girl, died in the chaotic camp for displaced people.

Despite suffering more tragedy than most people know in a lifetime, Kaltum is just 20 years old. Will she ever remarry? A look of disdain passes over her face at the stupidity of the question. “I won’t get married again. They killed all the men. Where would I find a husband?”

Ismail Abdel Karim, 62, disputes the idea that the *janjaweed* kill only men and spare women. “Whoever they find, they kill,” he says fiercely. “They make no distinction between men and women.” He remembers vividly

the day the attack came on his village—March 10, 2004. “We were peacefully staying in our village. We don’t know why they attacked us. We were in our home and they came and killed us.”

His grown sons managed to flee when the horsemen rode into town. “They got off their horses. I was sitting on the ground with the girls. They shot and killed my two daughters. One was married, one was young. Then they shot me.” He holds up his right arm, displaying a huge scar where the bullet entered the inside of his forearm, and came out the top of his arm. When the armed men rode off again, he managed to stop the bleeding and heal his wound using a poultice made of the bark of a local tree. Still mourning the loss of his daughters, he’s baffled by the violence that has engulfed his homeland. “I had nothing to do with the fighting. I was a farmer.”

Amina Mohammed, a 39-year-old farmer and mother of six dressed in a vibrant pink dress and headscarf, sits on the ground in Kalma camp southeast of Nyala in South Darfur, and tells of the day the *janjaweed* came to her village.

“They killed my family in our home, they killed five men, tak, tak, tak, tak,” she says, using her hands and her voice to imitate the action of an assault rifle. “They killed my five brothers. They killed Yousif. They killed Yahiya, Hussein, Bakr and Adam. Now I only have one brother left.”

These survivors tell their stories mostly in emotionless tones,

almost as though these horrors happened to someone else. Perhaps they are still in shock. Perhaps they’ve suffered so much they can’t register emotion any more. Or perhaps they are so intent on simply surviving until tomorrow that they don’t have the luxury of dwelling on their losses.

A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

And, as they know only too well, life here has always been brutal. The environment UNHCR and other aid agencies are working in is hostile in every sense of the word. Scorching temperatures (up to 55 degrees) in the shadeless desert alternate with violent seasonal rain storms that flood many displaced people’s shelters and make impassable the already poor roads.

Sudanese choose the uncertainty of flight into the harsh desert towards Chad over violent attacks at home in Darfur.

DARFUR TODAY'S WORST HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Sudan bowed to international pressure to let the world community try to ameliorate the humanitarian catastrophe. But even giving that help is difficult.

UNHCR has a particularly unenviable assignment—to protect displaced people in a region where almost no place is safe (a U.N. map shows only three types of territory in Darfur—insecure, very insecure and extremely insecure areas). Obstacles of every sort have confronted humanitarian agencies trying to help Darfur's victims. Whether the obstacles are intentional is hard to say.

By mid-year, months-long wrangles over visas for humanitarian workers were finally ironed out, but the bureaucracy continued to impede the import of cars and communications equipment vital for aid work. One medical charity reported its shipment of medical supplies had sat in metal containers in Port Sudan's 50-degree heat for three months. When the shipment was finally released, 70 percent of the medicine was ruined and had to be destroyed. Despite government assurances of easier access to Darfur, local authorities in July were still demanding travel permits for every single car trip to visit displaced people.

ETHNIC IDENTITIES

Although ethnic identities have traditionally been rather fluid in Darfur—a generation ago 'Arabs' who wanted to give up their nomadic way of life could join the Fur black African tribe simply by taking up farming—Darfur's victims unanimously believe they are being targeted because they are black. (Religion is not an issue, both sides are Muslim.)

One displaced man in Kalma camp says firmly he

Faki Abdel Karim, the 53-year-old father of eight children, used to be the richest man in his village near Wadi Saleh, in West Darfur. He ticks off his personal toll in the violence:

"They killed six family members. They killed four of my brother's children. They stole 30 cows, 20 goats and four donkeys and a donkey cart. They took 25 sacks of wheat and two scales, one big scale and one small scale. Looting is also one of their motives." The attackers even took a bicycle especially adapted for his disability—he lost the use of both legs six years ago after an attack by bandits.

Al Nour Adam, a 52-year-old farmer, also knows what it's like to lose everything. When his village of Adar was attacked, he lost horses, cows, sheep, chickens, a store of grain, and his life savings of 150,000 Sudanese dinars (\$577)—a fortune in this country. Now living in Riyadh camp, he works in nearby El Geneina as a casual laborer for just 200-300 dinars a day (about \$1), barely enough to give his wife and nine children two meals a day of porridge.

One of the most disturbing aspects of this conflict is the apparent systematic use of rape as a war tactic. In July, an Amnesty International report said women in Darfur were being systematically raped by Arab militiamen who use sexual abuse to torture and humiliate their victims. Describing what it called "a systematic policy designed to humiliate a group of people and tear apart their social fabric," Amnesty said it had interviewed hundreds of women raped in their villages or abducted and used as sex slaves. It said girls as young as eight had been taken as sex slaves, and had arms and legs broken to

AN AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL REPORT SAID WOMEN IN DARFUR WERE BEING SYSTEMATICALLY RAPED

and his fellow villagers were targeted "because of the color, the black color," he says, pulling the skin on the back of his hand. "They attacked us because we are Fur, 100 percent Fur." (Darfur means "homeland of the Fur.") Another Fur woman says the men who attacked her village screamed: "We are going to kill you. We are going to use you women, and we are not going to leave anybody. Because you are black, we are going to finish you all."

Kaltum Haroun, the 20-year-old woman who saw her four-year-old son and her husband killed before her eyes, says the *janjaweed* particularly target male children. "They say, 'if he grows up he will become Tora Bora.' But we don't even know what Tora Bora is," she says helplessly. "We have never seen Tora Bora." It's a slang name the *janjaweed* gave to the rebel SLA, after al-Qaeda's mountain redoubt in Afghanistan. For their part, the victims of this violence use *janjaweed* and 'Arab' interchangeably to identify their attackers. (*Janjaweed* is a local corruption of the Arabic phrase "devils on horseback carrying G3 rifles.")

Whatever the original motive for their attacks, the *janjaweed* don't miss the opportunity for personal profit.

stop them escaping.

"They take the women to faraway places and they bring them back the next day," a 19-year-old married woman from Kaileik tells UNHCR. Do the attackers rape the women? She responds with a bitter laugh: "It's obvious, what else do they do with them?" And how many women were raped? She throws up her hands helplessly: "Many, many, too many to count."

Babiker, the patriarch with the large family in Dorti camp, says the attacks on his village happened just over nine months ago. "They raped the women," he says. "All of them came back pregnant, and now they have borne babies."

"My daughter was raped by two *janjaweed* men," Mariam, a 46-year-old mother of nine now living in Kas town, says as she introduces her 17-year-old daughter to a UNHCR visitor. "During the fighting, women were raped. They took them to the mountains, away from the village. When my daughter came back the next day, she was turned into a woman," Mariam explains, using a euphemism for the loss of her daughter's virginity. The girl's 15-year-old sister was also raped.

Sadly, Mariam says her daughters will now never get married, though she defiantly adds that they have nothing to be ashamed of. Their rapes, Mariam says, have been crushing to her husband, a very religious man, but he has not rejected the girls, as sometimes happens in conservative Muslim cultures. “He can’t do anything about it. What can he do? He doesn’t have anyone who is strong to protect us. He has just accepted it.”

SUB-HUMAN CONDITIONS

Acceptance is the order of the day in the wretched camps for displaced people. Resilient survivors have put up thatched straw huts—the lucky ones have plastic sheeting covers—wherever they could. All outdoors is their toilet, and when the seasonal rains come, waste washes over the whole area. Camp residents have no facilities for washing themselves, and doctors fear outbreaks of diseases like cholera. “Worse is yet to come,” many aid workers warn grimly.

In a region that already suffered from what one U.N. official calls “out of control malnutrition,” the number of malnourished Darfurians is estimated to have grown to 20 or 25 percent of the population. An African doctor with an international aid agency calls the health of the displaced people “appalling.” U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan says the camps’ residents are living in “sub-human conditions—with inadequate food, shelter, water, medicine and other basic supplies.”

In July, aid agencies were just beginning to distribute food, and organize latrines, water supplies, and medical care in the spontaneous camps. UNHCR hopes to work with local non-governmental organizations to provide

who circle the camps on horseback by day and often raid by night, continue to refine their fiendish tactics. At Krinding camp in El Geneina, men had to stop venturing outside for firewood and water because they got killed, and young girls and women had to stop because they got raped. When the displaced people hit on the idea of sending out elderly women, the *janjaweed* attacked three of them and mutilated their genitals.

THE LIMITS OF RESILIENCY

These people are resilient, but they’ve nearly exhausted their capacity to withstand the horrors around them. The villagers of Wadi Saleh survived three attacks between September and November last year before they finally decided to flee. “The first time the government and the *janjaweed* came, we fled to the mountains and then came back for our harvest,” recalls Habib Husein, a 37-year-old farmer. “The second time they attacked, they killed people. We fled but we came back. The third time we came back to collect our things, but they came with their airplanes and their cars and horses. They killed people and attacked women. That’s when we left for good.” He says bitterly he doesn’t trust any government promises of protection.

In Riyadh camp with his four wives, 16 children and 12 other relatives, Ishaq Abdel Salam, the 52-year-old chief of Kera village, is equally pessimistic. “There is no place like home,” he says, surrounded by women from his village who declare adamantly they will never go back. “If I could start living my life normally, of course it is better to be at home than in this camp,” he says. But he doubts even U.N. peacekeepers could bring true security

“A POLICY DESIGNED TO HUMILIATE A GROUP OF PEOPLE AND TEAR APART THEIR SOCIAL FABRIC.”

counseling for rape survivors, and is working with local police forces to try to stop continuing attacks on women within the camps by the *janjaweed* raiders.

“Hundreds of thousands of people may die,” U.N. Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland has warned, if steps aren’t taken to end the fighting with two rebel groups and to disarm and demobilize the rampaging militias. There was still little sign of that happening in mid-July.

The Sudanese government has repeatedly encouraged the displaced people to go home to their destroyed villages, but the displaced say they have no faith in security pledges from those they believe allowed them to be chased away in the first place.

“I think they are right to be nervous, they are right not to have confidence. They need to see practical measures that will offer them the kind of protection that we are discussing here. And, until they get that, they cannot be confident that security is around the corner,” U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said at a press conference in mid-July.

Even the camps are not entirely safe. The *janjaweed*,

to Darfur. “This is a vast country,” Ishaq says. “There are wadis (riverbeds), there are mountains, creeks, lots of places for people to hide. If we do not have soldiers distributed to many points, there will not be real security.”

“We have problems eating and finding water in this place,” says Zahra Abas, an outspoken 25-year-old woman living in Riyadh camp with her six children, aged one year to 11. “We don’t have food. We don’t have anything but we are not going to move a single step away from here,” because at least the camp offers a modicum of safety. Life here, she vows, is infinitely preferable to a return to her torched, deserted village. “We will not go back. They will kill us. I am willing to stay here in this camp for the rest of my life,” she says with a defiant shake of her head.

On a continent where there have been so many hopeful developments lately, where many long-standing conflicts are finally coming to an end, and millions of refugees now face the realistic prospect of going home after decades in exile, Darfur is a grim reminder of Africa’s discouraging, enduring capacity to produce protracted humanitarian disasters. ■

EASTERN CHAD *Diary*

ANNE-KIRSTEN GARBE was a Program Officer in eastern Chad from March to early May of this year, where UNHCR is helping tens of thousands of Sudanese refugees fleeing from Darfur. Following are excerpts from her diary, a personal account of the daily challenges of a humanitarian worker in the field

11 APRIL 2004, EASTER SUNDAY, Abeche

It is 8 p.m. on a Saturday evening and we have just finished working. We are tired and as usual our little team gathers in the courtyard of the office to have a few beers and eat cold leftovers from lunch. Sometimes, somebody heats up the food but not today. The generator has just been switched off as city power goes on. It is still hot and only a slight breeze outside gives us some relief. We are exhausted from the heat, the endless noise of the generator and from work. Even making a simple phone call can take hours and e-mail only seems to work when you are about to smash your Thuraya satellite phone against the wall. At least the beer comes from the freezer as does the Coke. We all smoke too much. But, right now our own health does not seem to be our main concern.

That is as far as it gets with evening entertainment in Abeche sub-office, eastern Chad. Tonight is special, though. It is Easter Sunday tomorrow and we have decided that for once we will sleep in. No one is allowed to go to the office before 8 a.m.! What a luxury. No one here has had a day off since they arrived and everyday seems the same – there is no difference between Sundays, workdays or Easter, for that matter. When we collect our colleagues the next morning from the two houses where we live, it turns out that everyone was awake by 6 a.m. but dared not move. After all, it was our long morning sleep-in. But, the heat is unbearable and makes it impossible to sleep long after sun-

rise. Electricity is on from 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. but even with the ceiling fan it still feels like a blow dryer is being directed at you.

Happy that we are finally able to go to the office again, and even happier about the fact that at least most of us were able to take a shower before the water was turned off (there is always the unlucky one who finds himself under the shower fully shampooed when the water goes off), we set off.

We all live together in two houses. We also have all our meals together in the office as there are no kitchens in the houses. Surprisingly, there is almost no tension between team members although we spend almost 24 hours together.

As usual, we stop on our way to the office to buy bread. As soon as the bread man sees us he starts to fill

At night, after a long day visiting refugee sites along the remote Chad-Sudan border, UNHCR team leader Yvan Sturm downloads his e-mails on his laptop through his Thuraya satellite phone by lamplight.



UNHCR/H. CAUX/07/TCR-2004

UNHCR/H. CAUX/07/TCR-2004



**“MOST OF THE TENTS ARE SAND COLORED AND SEEM TO MERGE WITH THE SOIL.
THE NEW TENTS ARE STILL WHITE, BUT THE SANDSTORMS WILL DO THEIR JOB QUICKLY.”**

a plastic bag with bread. Daily routine – no words needed. To make this morning even more special, we bought fresh eggs from the market the day before to make our first omelet. But, even this fails because egg number 11 is bad and spoils all the rest. Nevertheless, we are determined to enjoy our Easter Sunday breakfast together. We ignore the sand in the bread, we pretend that the Nido powder milk tastes like real milk and that *La vache qui rit* is the cheese we just love. The usual procedure every morning – only one hour later.

This morning breakfast, besides our evening drinks, is the only time when we relax and chat and laugh. That is before the day starts with its little catastrophes and all the things that could go wrong and do wrong. We talk about what we would eat if we were not here but at home. We all start doing that after a while – we talk about things we miss, such as the cinema. Today, we learnt that a Canadian movie won the Oscar. We talk a lot about mountains, snow, lakes and

the sea, about sailing and scuba diving.

This is not surprising given the weather and the fact that finding water for people and animals proves to be one of the most difficult problems we are faced with in our operation in Chad. At this point, the capacity of the wells and boreholes in the existing six camps is insufficient to cover the needs of the refugees and those still steadily arriving. At the same time, we know that in two or three months there will be so much water with the rains that we will not be able to move people into the camps. So, even if we suffer from the dry heat, how much worse must it be for the refugees in the camps and for those at the border?

1 MAY 2004, Farchana

The heat is practically unbearable now. Nearly 50 degrees. It is noon and we are standing on a small hill.

Caught in a sandstorm in Chad, a UNHCR staff member helps new arrivals from Sudan take their belongings to a UNHCR truck that will transport them to Touloum camp, near Iriba, eastern Chad.



“WE ARE ALL JUST TRYING OUR BEST, AND THERE IS ONLY SO MUCH WE CAN DO FOR NOW...”

A UNHCR staff member with a newly arrived Sudanese family in eastern Chad.

Beyond us stretches the huge tent city of Farchana – the first UNHCR camp opened for Sudanese refugees in Chad. Most of the tents are sand colored and seem to merge with the soil. To our left, some tents are still white. But they won't be like that much longer. Sandstorms will do their job quickly.

The white tents are new. They were erected just the previous week to accommodate refugees arriving spontaneously from the border. The camp was planned and built for 6,000 people but by the end of April, their number had already risen to roughly 8,000 refugees, with more arriving by foot or buses every day.

As we climb down we decide to walk around and take a closer look. It is still surprising how organized and friendly the mainly female refugees in the camps are, after all they have been through and all the things that are still lacking in the camps. When talking to them they say they are grateful for what we are doing for them, that we give them shelter, food and water. All they are asking for is salt, sugar for tea and some vegetables. Not much, really. We are working on that.

When passing the water point we see a long line of jerry cans and women in colorful *thaub* (the traditional Sudanese cloth that women wrap around themselves) waiting in the sun. When asked, they tell us they have been there all morning but no water had been distributed yet. Again, no anger. But, this does show our main problem – water.

Although MSF is working hard to finish the water distribution system, it will not be enough to give a minimum of 15 liters per person to the refugees. We are in a

real dilemma. What shall we do? We cannot send back refugees to the border where they might be attacked and their few belongings plundered by Sudanese Arab militias crossing the border, and where they have no food and no water.

In a discussion with the members of the refugee camp committee, we try to explain all this and encounter – not surprisingly – understanding. Although that makes us feel better, we cannot ignore the animal corpses around the camp, the trees and bushes that have been cut for firewood and for building fences around the tents and people who are sleeping on the ground. These are problems we still have to tackle. Time is running out. The refugees keep arriving. The camp is at its maximum capacity and cannot keep taking in more refugees. Finding new camp sites before the rains start seems a “mission impossible.”

The same evening, during a heated discussion with our implementing partners, we are, it seems, trying to find a solution to the unsolvable water problem. In the end a plea from a very tired-looking colleague – What can we do? We all are just trying our best and there is only so much we can do for now but we cannot send them back! And if that means reducing the water ration even further – we will do it.

Afterwards, we have dinner and go to bed. It makes us think of one of the concerns raised during today's meeting with the camp committee. They asked whether UNHCR could give them beds as they are afraid of the snakes and scorpions that come into their tents at night. ■

SIERRA LEONE

**“We want reconciliation. We will never forget.
BUT WE TRY TO FORGIVE”**

The first steps in a newfound peace in post-war Sierra Leone

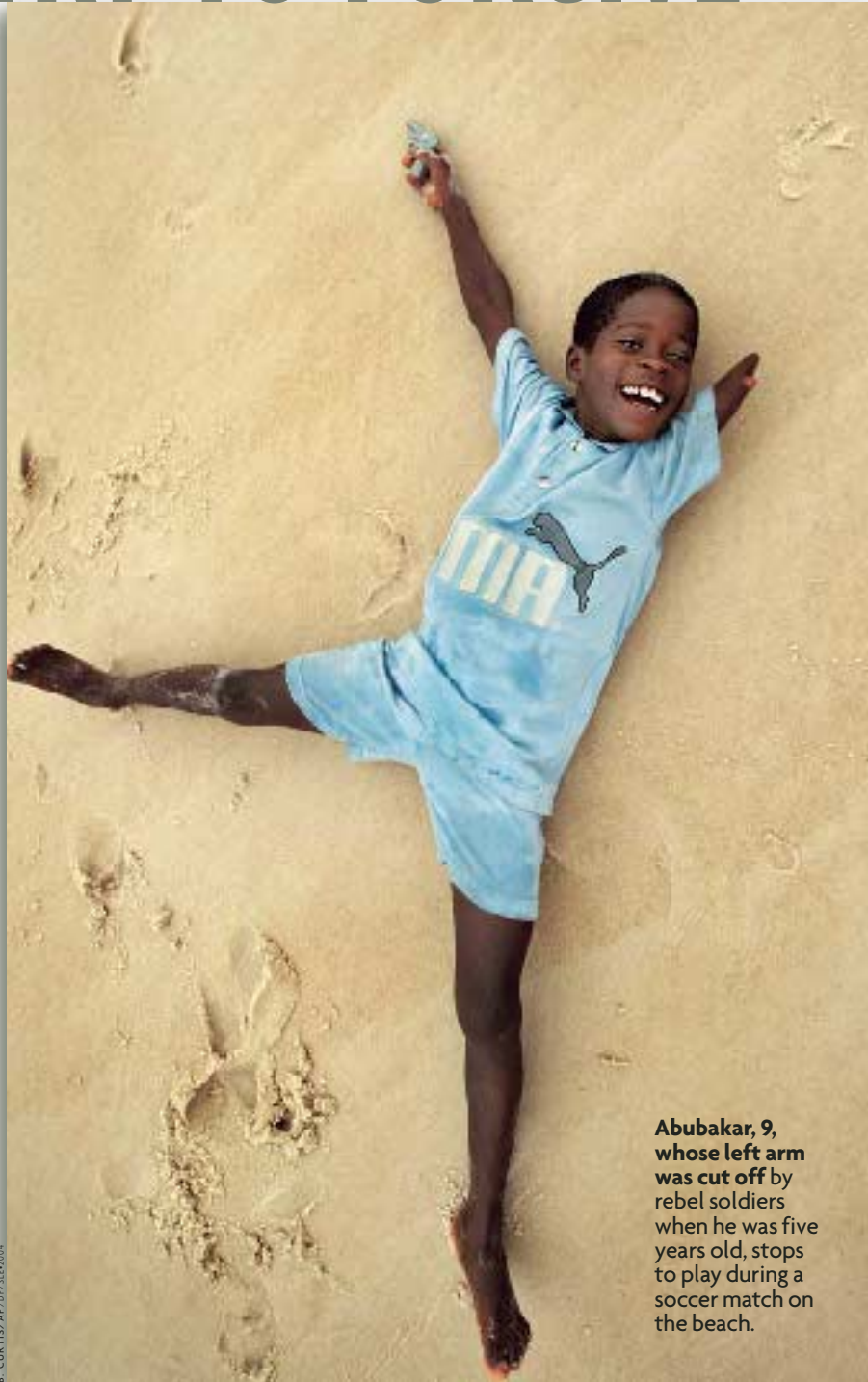
by ANNETTE REHRL

There is a beach on the African coast of the Atlantic Ocean that looks very tempting. The sea is calm, palm trees sway softly in the warm breeze. Children are laughing and playing on the beach. Dogs chase each other in mad joy. On the horizon appears the silhouette of a fishing boat out at sea. Leisure time, it seems. A time to feel confident.

Lulled by the dreamy ambiance, an unwary swimmer starts to step into the water. All of a sudden, a powerful wave knocks him to the ground, swirls him away, then with a wild temper slings him back ashore. Every year, experienced swimmers drown on the beautiful beaches of Sierra Leone. Danger and violence are always lurking, even in peaceful surroundings. Just as daily reminders of a violent past live alongside hopes for a better future in this small country.

You never know what is lying beneath the surface. You never know if the friendly shopkeeper in downtown Freetown might be a war criminal who hacked people to death during the decade-long civil war from 1991 to 2002. That's unless you go for a walk with an ex-child soldier of the former Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Only then you find out that he and other small children were abducted by this seemingly friendly man. Only then you find out that back in 1998, when the boy was just seven years old, the shopkeeper forced him to witness his parents being killed, then packed stolen loot onto his small head and ordered him and other captured children to follow him.

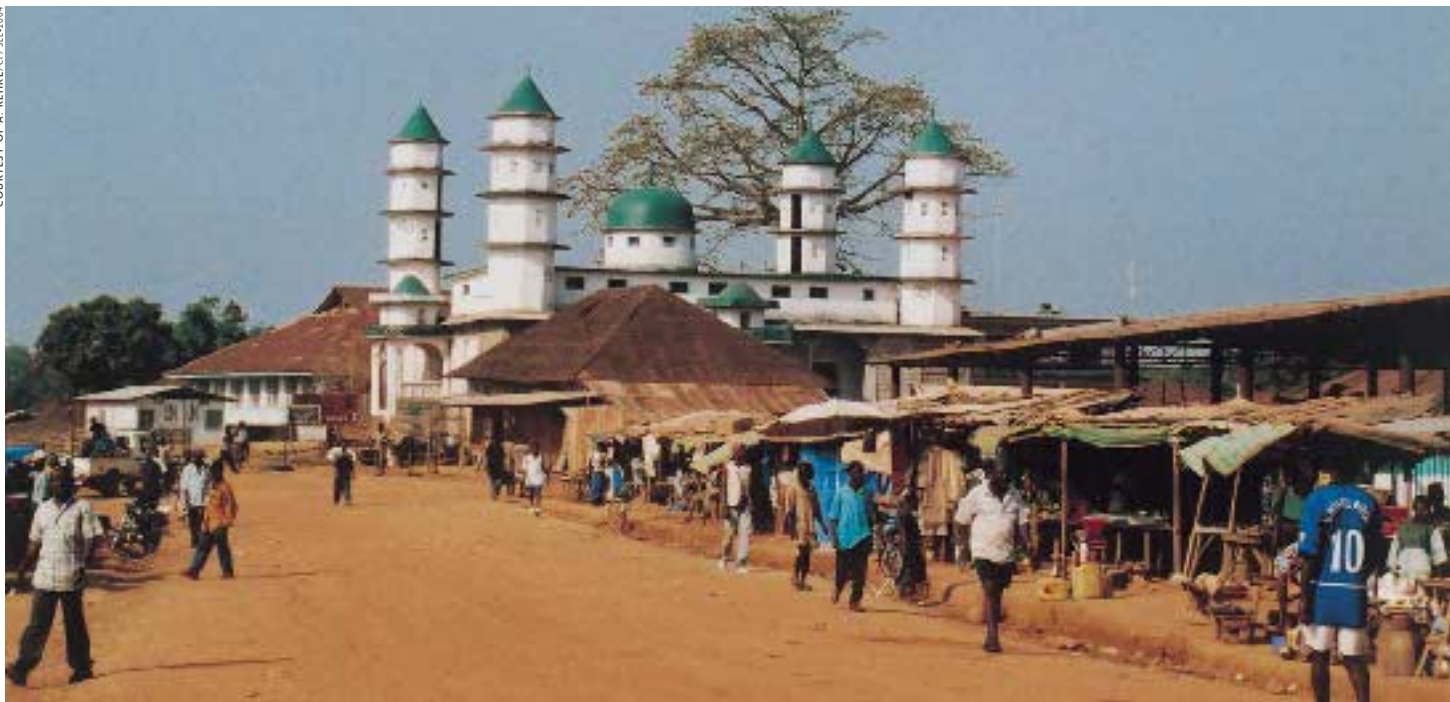
“Everyday when I walk by, he says hello to me,” says an indignant Suleiman, now 13 years old. “I don't even want to look into his eyes. We both know what we went through. But when I have no choice to avoid him, I say hello too. We've been told to reconcile in our country.



Abubakar, 9, whose left arm was cut off by rebel soldiers when he was five years old, stops to play during a soccer match on the beach.

B. CURTIS/AP/07/SLE004

COURTESY OF A. REHRL/CF/31E/2014



IN POST-WAR SIERRA LEONE, PEOPLE ‘DISAPPEAR’ DURING THE NIGHT. DAYS LATER THEY ARE FOUND

The war is over,” he said, with a mixture of relief and resignation. “But, these people should be tried,” he adds. “They harmed us so much and only showed us how to do evil.”

Since March 2004, some alleged war criminals are being tried by the re-established Special Court for Sierra Leone. Even so, one of its top prosecutors, David Crane, is still looking for the ‘Most Wanted’.

“This Special Court is nothing more than a cosmetic intervention,” comments Osman Jalloh, a skeptical 35-year-old teacher. He lost his family when his village was attacked by the government forces who switched sides at night and performed even worse atrocities than the rebels they were supposed to be fighting.

Everything was allowed, back then. Almost everything is allowed today.

“People in the villages remember exactly who did what during the war,” Osman asserts.

That is why sometimes in post-war Sierra Leone, people still ‘disappear’ during the night. Days later they are found dead in the bush. Some call it local justice in times of official trials. Others just call it revenge.

A STRAND OF HOPE

Further east, in the middle of the bush on the Guinean border, the small city of Kailahun has the appearance of

a vibrant way station. Between the skeletons of the once colorful colonial architecture, men chat on doorsteps while small boys memorize the Koran. Pakistani UN-AMSIL troops have helped rebuild the town’s beautiful mosque and conference hall. “8,909 kms to Islamabad”, declares a road sign in the center of town. The signs on the three main roads list almost all the NGOs and international organizations operating in the country. Every second building hosts a so-called “program”. Kailahun’s population is a mixture of returnees, displaced people, ex-combatants, soldiers and locals.

The people here lost their property and their loved ones long ago. They lost their confidence, their pride, some even their self-respect. All lost part of themselves during the war. But they are all trying to keep their dignity intact. Everyone here is searching for a new starting point and looking for some strand of hope to hold on to.

Newly arrived Sierra Leonean returnees at Kailahun’s way station nurture hope too. After living for nearly 13 years in refugee camps across the river in Guinea, they have finally decided to come home. UNHCR has already resettled nearly 30,000 returnees.

On a balmy tropical morning on the beach of the Moa River, 90 returnees set foot on home ground after crossing the river on rafts and canoes provided by UNHCR. A four-year-old boy stumbles out of the canoe crying for his mother somewhere in the small crowd.

“Welcome home!” a voice shouts from a megaphone.

A UNHCR staff member spots the lost child and leads him gently by the hand to the convoy where his mother is waiting. As she steps into the truck, the boy grabs her skirt, then looks around for the first time at his home country.





DEAD IN THE BUSH. SOME CALL IT LOCAL JUSTICE. OTHERS JUST CALL IT REVENGE.

Later another family arrives at Kailahun way station carrying two wooden chairs, four sacks of rice, seven bags and three children—all born in a refugee camp near Kissidougou, in Guinea.

“Those are all your belongings?”

“Yes,” they say, not counting the mats, kerosene lamps, kitchen items and bowls handed out by UNHCR.

“How shall we get all that to our village?” the man asks with desperation. His more pragmatic wife first feeds their middle child, then with the newborn baby slung on her back, patiently shifts all their possessions into the shade. She stacks the bags, arranges the chairs and places the domestic items on top. Her husband watches with admiration. After her careful intervention their household goods look definitely more compact but the problem of transportation to their village 200 kms away still remains. It’s the first steps of a new life.

A STRANGE NEW WORLD

Many Sierra Leoneans are attempting their first steps in this newfound peace. Almost everybody is at least ten years “behind”, but no one wants to look back. It’s the future that counts, they say. In this strange new world, stranded veterans find themselves living next door to war criminals. Former child combatants come face to face with their torturers in the streets. War amputees who had their limbs brutally hacked off during the war are confronted with the perpetrators of their horrible mutilations, if they happen to live in the same area.

“If the boy who cut off my arm goes to prison now, well, then maybe that’s called justice,” 45-year-old Siah Mansaray says angrily. He is living in Aberdeen’s war amputee camp, waiting for a new home. “But even if that

boy goes to jail, I will never get my arm back.”

The father of four lost his right arm in 1998 when RUF rebels started hacking off limbs of their fellow citizens to stop them voting for President Ahmed Kabbah. Even though the government is involved in a major construction program throughout the country to provide free housing for several thousand war amputees, the victims are complaining.

“They give us a house, but how are we supposed to survive? I was a farmer. How shall I work the fields with only one arm? Shall I serve my family bricks instead of rice?” cries one amputee.

Amongst the amputees, it’s the young that are facing a particularly merciless future. Even well-trained Sierra Leonean youths with their limbs intact don’t find jobs.

“The same vehicle, the same driver, the same passengers. And all the time we’re going in circles,” is how a member of the government armed forces describes the current situation in his country. “Nothing has improved. Not enough food. No jobs. No light. I wonder why we fought for ten years. Peace is okay, but what do you get out of peace, if you have no future?”

That is a question the government still has to answer.

“Slum” is too kind a word to describe the living conditions of many Sierra Leonean soldiers and their families, especially in rural areas. Some refugee camps seem like five-star shelters in comparison to the grinding poverty these families face. And, face patiently. Trying to get along somehow. Waiting for better times.

Twenty-year-old Ibrahim is an ex-child soldier who currently lives in a center for displaced and unaccompanied minors. He committed indescribable atrocities during the war and suffers now from ongoing night-

The rebuilt mosque in Kailahun.

Returnees at the way station in Kailahun.



B. CURTIS/AP/07/04/03

EVERYONE HERE IS SEARCHING FOR A NEW STARTING POINT AND LOOKING FOR SOME STRAND OF HOPE TO HOLD ON TO.

A young boy walks past a sign for a post-conflict youth training center carrying the message "No wicked heart shall prosper."

mares. The ghosts of the past keep haunting him.

"I see people screaming, running away in fear of me," he says. Every morning when he awakes, he is bathed in sweat. "If I go back to my village, I'll be finished," he says. "I know my people. They know me. People in Africa don't forget."

Fearing for his life, Ibrahim chose not to go through any of the numerous demobilisation, disarmament, reintegration and rehabilitation programs. Nor did he get any psychological counselling or skills training. In other words, he is neither one of the thousands of carpenters these programs have produced, nor one of its thousands of tailors. He would prefer instead to go to school and become literate.

Ibrahim wants to leave Sierra Leone and get resettled in a third country, hopefully with the help of UNAMSIL which runs a witness program for former child soldier special cases. Although he's now an adult, Ibrahim might have a chance of being accepted into this program since he was a child when he committed atrocities.

Ibrahim is in hiding all day long. His commanders, who abducted him 12 years ago when he was just eight years old and forced him to kill, burn and loot, and who injected cocaine into his open wounds—they have not been punished. Not yet.

LIFE MOVES ON

While Sierra Leoneans are coming to terms with each other, 7,500 Liberian refugees at Tobanda camp, near Kenema, are also getting a glimpse of how it feels to cope with the former enemy. They are involved in workshops and care for former CAFF children (Children Associated with Fighting Forces). The very children who might have killed their loved ones back in Liberia. They do it because life moves on.

The CAFF, as they are called, are playing football, holding on to each other like wounded animals in a pack. Their caretakers are skeptical, sometimes helpless. Young girls are walking around in T-shirts with slogans railing against domestic violence.

A 72-year-old Imam, a member of the grievance committee who spent three months hiding in the bush, keeps repeating two phrases: "All killed" and "God is Almighty". He fled with nothing but the clothes on his back. At Tobanda camp he was given a Koran. All that is left for him now are the suras to recite and memories at night of rebels attacking his village. "Killing" is the most common word heard. "Surviving" the most appreciated one.

The powerful emotions surging through the refugees required special attention.

"We engaged ourselves in the camp administration because we wanted to do some service for our community," 76-year-old Tigan Mansaray of the council of elders explains. "First we had to cool down tensions. Whenever people are frustrated, aggressions show up.

Most of the aggressions were due to offences," he recounts. "Refugees easily feel offended living in such circumstances. So, we tried to calm them down. And it worked. Now people have learned that they can live together as neighbors. We belong to different tribes, but here in the camp we get along well. Even with the CAFF children we get along. They adapt to caring surroundings. This is encouraging for the future of Liberia. Once we go back, we want to be living witnesses to our communities there. We want to engage in civil society." Encouraging plans.

OVERCOMING THE PAST

But, there is a big question mark hanging over the entire region and over Sierra Leone in particular. A question mark reflected in everybody's eyes. Ten years of killing, devastation and mutilation have not vanished, although people desperately want peace.

"Why did you do this to each other?" visitors keep asking.

"We don't know," they reply. "We need reconciliation. We want reconciliation. We will never forget. But we try to forgive."

That resolution to overcome the past will be tested when the last UNAMSIL troops pull out in December 2004. It will then be up to this newborn society to show themselves and their neighbors that war can have a cathartic effect. That the senseless decade of killing need not be repeated. That re-education programs in refugee camps might offer an alternative for civil coexistence. That humanity can improve, if only there is a will. ■

ANNETTE REHRL is a freelance journalist in Berlin and author of a book on Sierra Leone's children, published in 2004, in cooperation with UNHCR.

LIBERIA

A prayer for peace in the 'LAND OF THE FREE'



Liberia is trying to overcome its seemingly unending nightmare

by FERNANDO DEL MUNDO

Dama Kamara fled to a refugee camp in Guinea in 1989 when Charles Taylor began an uprising in Liberia. Four years later, she went back to her home at Sarkannedou, a village outside Voinjama in Liberia's volatile northern county of Lofa, but armed men torched the palm and mud huts in the area, forcing her to scurry away to Guinea once more.

In February, 40-year-old Kamara returned again with her farmer husband and five children, hoping

their homecoming will be permanent. "I pray that God will protect us. I pray that those who fought during the war will lay down their arms or no peace will come."

Kamara needs more than divine intercession to make a new life. The nation has been devastated by 14 years of continual civil strife. Towns and villages lay in ruins or are being reclaimed by the forest. Some see in the long monsoon rains a sign that the gods weep for Liberia's seemingly unending nightmare.

But many more are optimistic, voting with their feet on the future of their country after Taylor, the cause of their recent miseries, went into exile in Nigeria in Au-

Liberians who returned from Sierra Leone find their village in ruins.

LIBERIA

gust 2003 as rebels pushed to his presidential mansion in the capital, Monrovia, at the edge of the Atlantic. Since then, thousands of uprooted Liberians have been trickling back to their homes—from refugee camps in neighboring Guinea, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire; from facilities for internally displaced people, or IDPs. Some Liberian refugees have risked taking leaky boats from Nigeria and Ghana to reach their homeland.

Following Taylor's departure, a peace accord was hammered out in Ghana, ending a war that claimed 200,000 lives and forced close to a million people from their homes. It called for the establishment of a transitional government in the nation of 2.6 million people and elections in October 2005. Rebels of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) signed the accord.

GREATER COMMITMENT

A 15,000-strong United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) subsequently began deploying across the country. A nation-wide program of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration was implemented. By late July, some 60,000 fighters had surrendered their weapons and cantonment sites had been opened.

"The current form of involvement of the United Nations in Liberia is the first of its kind since the initial outbreak of the conflict in the country in 1989," says Moses Okello, UNHCR's representative in Liberia. "There is a

the Wind." Large parts of the country are covered by majestic, triple-canopy rain forests.

DESCENT INTO HELL

The descent into hell started 133 years after Liberia's founding when Master Sergeant Samuel Doe staged a coup in 1980 and executed President Samuel Tolbert, Jr. Doe himself was assassinated a decade later in the rebellion Taylor and his National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) mounted. Even before Taylor, a former Liberian economics minister and escaped convict in the United States, finally became president of Liberia, NPFL itself had splintered and West Africa was never the same again.

A victorious and vengeful Taylor turned his eye toward Sierra Leone, used as a staging area for a West African peacekeeping effort to stave off a bloodbath by NPFL troops in Monrovia following Doe's murder. Allies in the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) led by Foday Sankoh and Sam Bukarie, alias Mosquito, plunged Sierra Leone into a decade of brutality that ended two years ago with the arrival of British and U.N. peacekeepers.

Diamonds, drugs and timber along the lush Sierra Leone-Liberia border funded Taylor's adventures in the politically fragile region. Liberian militias and teen soldiers crossed porous borders where guns and war booty were traded freely. Localized conflicts ensued, resulting in a tragic game of musical chairs for refugees caught in the maelstrom time and again.

Once a beacon of light and previously the world's ma-

"THE LIBERIANS ARE DEEPLY TRAUMATIZED. THEY HAVE TO REDISCOVER THEIR OWN RHYTHMS OF LIFE, THEIR SMALL JOYS AND CELEBRATIONS."

greater commitment by the international community to see to it that the conflict is resolved and, hopefully, also to make sure that it does not backslide to where it has come from."

But Okello adds: "Liberia's problems cannot be seen only within the time capsule of the 14 years through which it has undergone violence. Liberia's story begins at its very founding back in 1847, with the arrival of the American Colonization Society... Liberians need to accept their Liberian identity. There is a section of the Liberian population that tends to control the political and economic life of the country and that tends to think that it is American and look too much to America to the detriment of the rest of Liberians."

Liberia, which means "Land of the Free," was established by emancipated African slaves in the Americas who promulgated a constitution patterned after the United States. Despite its diverse ethnic makeup, most people talk in Liberian English. There is a gentility in the air in some areas, particularly in the lovely port city of Harper in the east, as residents greet strangers on the streets. Harper has quaint buildings and half a dozen churches reminiscent of the antebellum period in the U.S. south. It is like a snapshot in the movie "Gone with

the Wind." Large parts of the country are covered by majestic, triple-canopy rain forests.

major cocoa producer, Côte d'Ivoire has become the most recent casualty of civil strife that has troubled many African countries. There, a failed mutiny turned into a full blown rebellion in September 2002. Liberian fighters were enlisted by the warring factions in Côte d'Ivoire, and Taylor reportedly provided bodyguards to the late Ivorian General Robert Guei.

At Harper, relief agencies are attempting to piece together reports based on eyewitness accounts of a massacre around nearby Freetown, a Liberian village near the border with Côte d'Ivoire. They say helicopter-borne troops landed in the area sometime in August last year and slaughtered 359 residents in villages that had provided Liberian fighters to government forces in Côte d'Ivoire. The dead were later dumped into mass graves. A full blown investigation has not been carried out because U.N. troops have not deployed in the area. The report, although unconfirmed, underscores the security anxieties of Liberians and fears of a prevailing climate of impunity.

HEADING HOME

Where there is a U.N. troop presence, uprooted people are heading home—from neighboring refugee camps



S. DAS/AP/DP/1882103

hosting 350,000 Liberians or the 20 facilities inside the country sheltering another 300,000 IDPs. UNHCR planned to begin organized repatriation from the refugee camps in October. In the meantime, it has begun implementing community-agreed projects involving revival of basic services to provide people with modest incomes.

With the U.N., came the relief agencies. At Sarkannedou, Peace Wind Japan has begun rebuilding schools, with funding from the U.N. refugee agency. Japanese workers have also been handing out shelter kits to 700 of the most impoverished families and rehabilitating water and sanitation facilities.

Nearby Gbarnga and Voinjama in the northern counties of Lofa and Bong have attracted returnees despite the lack of infrastructure. “We are in dire need of everything,” says Ester Walker, Gbarnga’s mayor who held office under a tree.

Thousands of Liberians have also returned from Côte d’Ivoire into the Harper area. Shops and restaurants have opened there. The Danish Refugee Council has begun rehabilitating schools and clinics. A dollar-a-day project provides employment to Harper residents in road and canal clearing projects and repairs to the harbor lighthouse. The International Committee of the Red Cross distributes machetes and seeds to farmers under a program designed to help the displaced gradually return to normal life.

“The Liberians are deeply traumatized. They have seen so much killing, women have been raped, homes have been looted. They have to rediscover their own rhythms of life, their small joys and celebrations,” says ICRC’s Marc Beuniche.

IS THE LIBERIAN NIGHTMARE FINALLY OVER?

Some rebel leaders have publicly apologized for their role in the conflict—men like Joshua Blaye, previously known as General “Butt Naked” who led a brigade of fighters in their birthday suits in the belief that this made them invincible against their well-armed enemies in their wacky wars in Buchanan, Kakata and Tubmanburg. He has become an evangelist and goes around in fashionable western suits.

Although Taylor is gone, his sympathizers remain. MODEL and LURD leaders have little control over their men in the field. In Voinjama, ex-combatants or LURD people occasionally fire their guns during the night to scare people away so they can loot their houses—a tactic used to sow terror during the war. LURD or MODEL people are regarded in the countryside as nothing more than thugs. They wear soccer jerseys, NBA sneakers, shades and funky get-ups and race through villages on motorbikes. They harass returnees at the Guinean and Ivorian frontier crossings and extort “taxes” from villagers.

Taylor is no longer regarded as a threat for so long as he is denied contact with his former associates in Liberia, says Okello, who came to Liberia first in 1991 and has had several brushes with death at the hands of Taylor’s forces while looking after refugees in the field. “However, over the 14 years of the Charles Taylor phenomenon, there have been several thousand other ‘Charles Taylors’ that have been created. They pose the threat to the future of Liberia,” Okello says, unless political and economic conditions improve. And there is another imponderable: what its neighbors will do to a weakened Liberia. ■

West African peacekeepers watch as displaced Liberians trickle home.

In Smarra refugee camp near Tindouf in Algeria, El Ghalia weeps, laughs and makes repeated hugging gestures when asked what she will do when she meets her family in the Western Sahara Territory after decades of exile. The camps are named after the towns the refugees came from in the Territory.



Western Sahara

Emotions are running high in the Sahara desert as families split for nearly three decades by conflict over sovereignty of the Western Sahara Territory are being briefly reunited by a UNHCR family visit scheme. Spain's withdrawal from Western Sahara in 1975, and the following dispute for control, forced an estimated 165,000 people to flee across the border into Algeria—creating one of the world's most protracted refugee situations. Living in five windswept and isolated camps around Tindouf in southwestern Algeria for the last 28 years, the refugees have been almost totally cut off from their relatives in the Territory. So, when the U.N. refugee agency launched its five-day family visit scheme in March this year, aimed at re-establishing contact between the refugees and their relatives back in the Territory, there were tears of joy as well as apprehension at the prospect of reunion. The visit scheme is proving extremely popular with more than 800 people already having visited their relatives and another 18,000 signed up to go. UNHCR's photographer SUZY HOPPER captured these images on a recent trip to the region.



In the Territory, on a shaded side street in Smarra town, Mohammed Fathil anxiously awaits the arrival of his daughters El Ghalia, Aghbanama and five grandchildren he is never seen. Mohammed only heard about the visit 24 hours earlier and has hastily organized an outdoor party. Silver trays piled high with figs and almonds are placed on colorful rugs outside, and tea pots are lined up in front of the elderly father.



When the U.N. car carrying the long-lost family members finally arrives, the waiting women begin ululating wildly and beating tribal rhythms on overturned tubs. The new arrivals are submerged in a sea of tearful embraces. Family members sip and pass around ornately decorated wooden bowls with camel's milk while a female relative sprays the crowd with perfume. With temperatures running as high as the emotions at least one woman faints, hitting the ground with a hard thud.







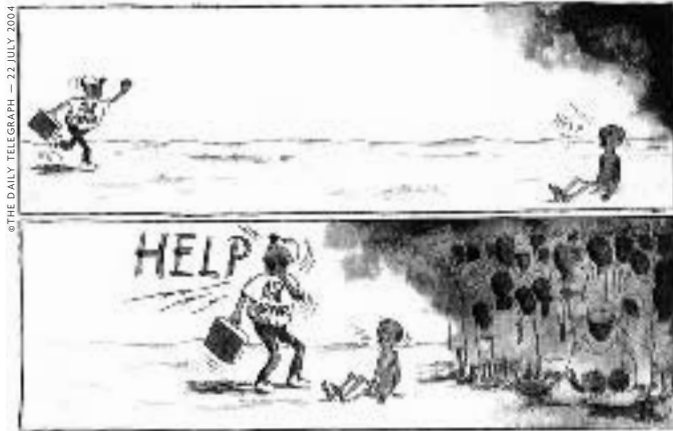
As the Antonov 26, provided by the U.N. Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), prepares to taxi down the runway and begin its hour-long trip, many refugees look uneasy. Jamal Kawash, MINURSO's Movement Control Assistant, walks down the aisles reassuring the nervous passengers. For many of the refugees this is their first flight. An experienced Ukrainian air hostess distributes air sickness bags liberally.







The welcoming parties at the refugee camps for relatives visiting from the Territory are no less emotional than on the other side of the border. Crowds of refugees engulf the U.N. car and there are outbursts of spontaneous dancing and singing with perfume sprayed over the crowd. At one point, the U.N. driver requests everyone to calm down and step back from the vehicle.



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“Each of these displaced needs a daily food ration very soon. They need water, and they need sanitation. This is not a Christmas wish list. This is the exact requirements for saving 1.2 million lives.”

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Jan Egeland briefing the U.N. Security Council on the crisis in the western Sudan region of Darfur.



“The stain of blood from Rwanda’s killing frenzy rests not only on the hands of those who brandished machetes. The taint also rests on those who did nothing to stop the killing.”

Richard S. Williamson, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva.



“Nearly 5 million people over the past few years have

been able to either go home or to find a new place to rebuild their lives.”

High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers, on the sharp decline in the number of refugees and others of concern to the agency in 2003, the lowest total in at least a decade.



“Arguing over the semantics of whether this is genocide, whether this is ethnic cleansing, does not do justice to the crisis. The fact is that hundreds of thousands of people are at risk... and that some type of action needs to be taken.”

John Heffernan, part of a team of Physicians for Human Rights, following his two-week visit to refugees from western Sudan’s Darfur region.



“Seeing a man who is old enough to be my father cry was a bit hard for me. But it was a very rewarding experience.”

Sulaiman Momodu, UNHCR’s public information assistant, who followed the last convoy of returnees from Liberia to Sierra Leone.



“I am sad to sit here as an Iraqi and ask for support, instead of giving support. Iraq is a rich country and I believe with your help, we can get through this mess as soon as possible and again be a proud, diverse and rich nation that can support others as well.”

Sorya Isho, Iraq’s Minister for Displacement and Migration, addressing donors in Amman, Jordan.



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