

SUDAN CRISIS

ONE GROUP RESPONDS TO NATION'S CRY FOR HELP



The Sudan crisis has claimed well over two million lives and displaced another four million. The conflict between the Sudanese government and rebel forces has been ongoing since the early '80s. However, it was only in 2003, after the government opened a new front against the people in the western province of Darfur that reports of mass killings got the attention of the human rights community and media outlets around the globe.

Since then few, if any, have gone as far to find a personal and interactive approach to spreading awareness about the conflict as the Global Nomads Group (GNG).

A non-profit organization located in New York City, GNG is dedicated to heightening children's understanding and appreciation for the world and its people. Founded in 1998, the organization uses technology such as videoconferencing to bring together, and enable young people from around the world to meet face-to-face.

Over a three week period last August, the group conducted live broadcasts with a relief worker and refugees from the Breijing Refugee Camp, located about 50 miles from the Chad/Sudan border.

Mark von Sponeck, GNG co-founder and executive

director GNG, says relief organizations found it difficult to aid the over-crowded camp.

"It was initially built for 18,000 refugees and when we were there, there was around 40-45,000, not including the spontaneous refugees who were outside of the camp," von Sponeck says. "Every day you had 400-500 spontaneous refugees showing up and, obviously not being able to get into the camp, [they waited] outside the camp to be registered. So for the relief agencies it was an extreme challenge."

"There were sanitation problems," he added. "They had built 300 latrines for 45,000 people when we got there... So there was a constant fear of the breakout of disease... There were a lot of malnourished babies.. and problems with the water so they had trucks with big bladders that would distribute water daily."

In addition to the physical setbacks in the camp, von Sponeck says there was a glaring lack of emotional support for the refugees. There were no councillors to help women and girls who had been raped, nor were there hardly any educational activities available for children. But despite everything the refugees at the camp had gone through, their morale was surprisingly high.

"They had just lost everything, absolutely every-

thing... Yet they were all so happy and smiling and you saw so much resilience on their faces. We figured out the reason behind it is they saw themselves as the lucky ones in many ways, because they weren't killed - they survived."

Von Sponeck says it is important to cover the sensitive topics like genocide with young students because it cultivates an atmosphere of understanding.

"Hearing it from their peers helps them to understand what had happened... If you explain these issues to a younger generation you hope as they get older they will be more compassionate."

So far, GNG has received many rave reviews from those who have used the service.

"It was very topical," says teacher Jeremy Meharg of Burnaby South Secondary School in British Columbia. "It was very informative and was presented really well. I like what GNG does."

GNG has even received the endorsement of Prince El Hassn bin Talal of Jordan, who invited the group to set up a live two-way interaction with children in the U.S.

"The opportunity to stimulate learning and exchange of information is so very important and we are most



>> A MESSAGE TO GEORGE

There is a country in this world that needs your help George. It is led by an authoritarian regime, has been ravaged by a civil war since 1983, and has innocent women and children dying regularly. No George, I am not talking about Iraq, I am talking about Sudan – a small country of approximately 40 million nestled in between Chad and Ethiopia.

George, this is a country you need to help. It needs you to bring in your coalition of troops and clean up the mess. In your own words you need to “smoke them out.” They need you to go in and create a democratic political infrastructure similar to the one you created in Iraq.

The only difference is Sudan really wants your help. Over two million people have died, many as a result of the atrocities committed in Sudan. Children are kidnapped and forcibly recruited as soldiers and labourers. You have stood by idly and watched this happen. Now George, I know the Sudan does not have one of the world’s largest unrefined oil supplies like Iraq, but it’s the right thing to do.

If you were about doing the right thing you would have sent more troops into Afghanistan to seek out “Big Bad Bin”, instead of doing a 180 degree turn and focusing on Iraq.

Hmm... maybe George you should tell the troops that despite Saddam’s capture they cannot go home to their families because you need to have control of Iraq’s oil supply, and you will sacrifice as many American troops as necessary to get the job done. I mean what do you care, none of your immediate family is fighting in the war.

America is supposed to be the unofficial Big Brother to the rest of the world – I guess that’s only the case when a country has oil or diamonds. George, is it safe to say that if a country has no money to pilfer and no oil to steal, the United States will turn its back on it quicker than you can push the war button? When is it going to end, George? When are you going to help the countries that really need it, and not those that can help you the most? Prove me wrong George. Do the right thing.

Yours truly,

The Critic

appreciative of this opportunity,” Talal said.

But while the organization has raised awareness about the crisis in the Darfur, von Sponeck is still concerned about the future of the region.

The monumental signing of a peace treaty in early January between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SLA) is a positive step towards peace in southern Sudan, but many feel it may do little to solve the ongoing conflict in the western region of Darfur.

“There are two main rebel groups in the Darfur region which are separate from the peace treaties signed in the south with the larger Christian population in Sudan,” von Sponeck says. “Darfurians felt marginalized from the peace treaty because they weren’t getting anything out of it.”

Less than a month after the signing, the United Nations’ (UN) International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur released a report that was undoubtedly met with criticism and disappointment by many in Darfur. The report states: “The Government of Sudan and the Janjaweed [A government-sponsored militia] are responsible for crimes under international law ... attacks on villages, killing of civilians, rape, pillaging and forced displacement have continued even while

it was conducting its inquiry... action must be taken urgently to end these violations.”

The Commission concluded the Government of Sudan “has not pursued a policy of genocide,” but specifies “in some instances individuals, including Government officials, may commit acts with genocidal intent,” and “the crimes against humanity and war crimes that have been committed in Darfur may be no less serious and heinous than genocide.”

These findings have angered many who feel religion is the main cause conflict in Sudan. Considering the government in the north of the country is predominantly Muslim-controlled, and most of the 2 million-plus victims of the conflict are Christian and followers of animist religions; it’s hard for those involved to view the atrocities as anything but genocide.

“They were shy of saying it was genocide...which is a bit of a disappointment, but I’m sure there will probably be an outcry as a result of it,” von Sponeck says. Unless there’s some form of acceptable power sharing, I think there’s going to be continual uprisings and frustration.” However, he feels media coverage is a vital step to resolving the issue.

“Some of these issues, sadly, don’t receive enough attention, and not only attention, but action as a result of the situation.”