

Canyon students recreate 'camp'

By Sharon Cotal
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As they crammed themselves into the small refugee tents Thursday, Canyon High School students got the feel of what it's really like to have to leave one's home and live in a refugee camp - just like the more than 2 million people in Darfur, Sudan, who have been forced to flee since 2003 because of violence in that country.

The simulated refugee camp, called Camp Darfur, was made up of eight authentic United Nations tents, each filled with information about genocide and crimes against humanity throughout recent history.

"We want the students to get a better understanding of what life is like outside the United States, and a better appreciation for the life they have here at home," said Nancy Nazarian-Medina, advisor to the Human Rights Watch Student Task force, which organized the event.

"It's to help educate high school students about life in a refugee camp, as well."

In the various tents, students learned about historical genocides including the Holocaust, Armenia, Cambodia, Rwanda, and the humanitarian crisis currently taking place in Darfur. In the Darfur tent, Canyon senior Adrian Chapman told students that, while the United States officially recognized Darfur as a genocide in 2005, the Sudanese government refuses to do so.

"As you walk through the tents today, look around and learn and think about what you can do to help," Chapman told the students packed into the tent. "As a country, America has a lot of resources, and we can stop this thing."

Other tents set up across Canyon's senior quad provided information about medical provisions supplied to refugees and the plight of child soldiers. The food and water tent contrasted the typical daily diet of an American teen with the small sustenance provided to a teen refugee, and the media tent allowed students to send a taped video message to refugees in Darfur.

"I told them to keep faith, because help is on the way," said Canyon senior Mayra Castaneda, who had recorded a message. The tapes will be taken to a Darfur refugee camp in June.

In Darfur, about 200,000 people have been killed and more than 2 million have been forced from their homes. The United Nations has passed a resolution to intervene, but U.N. peacekeepers have been denied access to Sudan.

Canyon senior Mike Spagnola said he learned a lot from the Camp Darfur experience. "I learned the most in the Armenian tent because, honestly, I had no idea that was even part of history," Spagnola said.

"I think anything that's trying to promote peace in the world is OK with me."

Canyon High is one of only two high schools in Los Angeles county this year to provide the Camp Darfur program, which is more commonly found at the university level. "We hope that students will realize that they have the power to influence policy," Nazarian-Medina said. "They can make a difference."