

Gabriel Stauring, Stop Genocide Now

“This is not history, genocide is happening now.”

Farha is a fourteen year old girl refugee who lost her father when her village was attacked during the ongoing genocidal campaign in Darfur, Sudan. She lives in Refugee Camp Oure Cassoni, on the Chad-Darfur border, along with another 30,000 Darfurians. Farha is in charge of taking care of her younger siblings, since her mother went looking for a son that became separated during the attack. Her mother has been gone for forty one days; they have not heard from her. Farha and the other refugees at Oure Cassoni live in constant fear because of the lack of security in the camp and surroundings.

“Would we accept this if Farha was our neighbor, or in the town over. What about if she was in the next state, or in the next country? Why is distance a diminishing factor of our ability to care?”

Q&A

Q: Were you able to communicate with the people in the camps?

A: We spoke with the refugees through a translator, although there were a few individuals who spoke English. Most impressive was Ahmat, a sixteen year old boy who had studied English on his own.

Q: Were the photographs in the slideshow representative of the camps?

A: Yes, as you noted from the pictures there were mostly women and children living in the camps. When people in the camps say that their husbands, sons, or brothers are “back in Sudan,” they mean that the men are either dead or fighting.

Q: Did the people in the camps like being photographed?

A: Yes, we would get out of our cars and the children would flock to us. Their faces would light up with laughter. The children loved when I would turn the viewfinder of my camera around so that they could see themselves as I panned across their crowds.

Q: Were raids going on while you were there?

A: There was a lot going on while we were there, but we would always be right ahead or right behind the violence. We were relatively safe compared to the people in the camps, especially the women who would have to leave the camps to look for firewood. Aid organizations like the World Food Program will give the camps raw supplies that the people will need to cook. Because of this women go out of the camps to collect firewood. When they do this they are often attacked and raped.

Q: Did you ever go with the women to collect firewood?

A: Unfortunately no, we met so many amazing women in the camps. The women do everything there, they cook, they build the houses, and they take care of the children. The women maintain the daily order of life in the camps.

Q: Were you ever attacked directly?

A: No, although sometimes there would be outbreaks of violence near where we were staying.

Q: Where did you stay?

A: We tried to connect with as many aid and humanitarian groups as possible and stay with them; oftentimes we would be in tents. We couldn't stay in the camps themselves, because all aid workers and non-Sudanese would have to leave the camps at 5pm.

Q: How did the women and children get to the camps?

A: They would have to walk from their villages to the camps. They have to trek through the desert and many people die along the way. The walk usually ranged from about nine to ten days. Farha, the fourteen year old girl taking care of her younger siblings, told me that she and her family had to walk twenty-five days to reach the camp of Oure Cassoni.

Q: Besides security, what other problems did the refugees have to deal with at the camps?

A: Education was a huge problem. The children usually gather in a big group and sit under a shady tree for their lesson. Their teachers would tell us that the children would have trouble concentrating because they've seen so much and been so traumatized. The other major problem was food. The aid organizations give the refugees enough food to ensure that they're getting the necessary, healthy calorie amount, but it's very minimal and basic. The people would complain that there were no spices and that the food was bland and had no taste.

Q: What did you see at the camps that made you more hopeful about the situation?

A: Hope is the operative word here, the people are have seen so much and yet they're so resilient. Still, even three years after the genocide has begun. The people that I would talk to would get so excited that there was someone out there who cared about them, and I would feel guilty at times because I was just a messenger.

Q: Did you travel by yourself or with a specific organization.

A: The i-Act program was launched by my group, Stop Genocide Now, but on the ground we partnered with the various aid groups in Chad. They were able to help us get around the area and get into the various camps.

Q: Is there a problem of drought in the area?

A: The limited amount of supplies and water is definitely a problem for the camps. However, the camps that I visited were in Chad, and the problems and conditions that exist there, are nothing compared to what is happening to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). At the moment there are currently 2.5 million IDPs who are constantly in danger of attack from the Janjaweed and the Sudanese government. Most recently about 10,000 IDPs were driven from their camp, so we have situations of already displaced people being displaced.

Q: What kind of response have you received from showing your photos and video?

A: The response has been great, people are now connecting to the issue on a more personal level.