

Stories Among Us: Personal Accounts of Genocide

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Every Wednesday through June 11, join us for **Stories Among Us: Personal Accounts of Genocide**, exploring past and present atrocities through the oral histories of genocide survivors in our region. Produced in partnership with the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center.



Agnes Oswaha, Seattle, 2008

Chapter Nine

AGNES' STORY: FROM SUDAN TO SEATTLE

Written by
Agnes Oswaha

As the largest country in Africa, Sudan is home to many different religions, ethnic groups and languages. Since its independence from the British in 1956, the country has been consumed by violence between the Arab/Muslim government in Khartoum (northern Sudan) and the largely Christian regions in the South.

Agnes Oswaha grew up as part of the ethnic Christian minority in Sudan's volatile capital of Khartoum. In 1998, Agnes immigrated to the United States. She has become an outspoken advocate for action against the atrocities occurring in Darfur.

There is a saying that my mother, my reservoir of strength, always used: "When two elephants fight, the grass underneath suffers the most." This has certainly been the case in Sudan, a nation that experienced peace for only about a decade since its independence from British-Egyptian colonialism on January 1, 1956.

During the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005), the violence between North and South Sudan destroyed the lives of many people, especially southern Sudanese. According to the U.S. Department of State, more than two million southern Sudanese died and four million were displaced. I have lost brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents and precious friends in what is now the longest civil unrest in history.

In October 2004, my baby sister Esther, a medical student, was lit on fire near our house in Khartoum. Although Esther survived the gasoline/kerosene fire,

she is still living with the physical pain, deformity and paralyzing fear of being attacked again by those who hate her because of her ethnic and religious background.

For the first 20 years of my life, I lived as a southern Sudanese Christian minority in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. In Khartoum, Arab-Muslims are the majority and hold the positions of power. Growing up, I faced educational and social obstacles as a young Christian female in a predominantly Muslim nation. I was forced to learn the Arabic language, read the Koran and abide by the teachings of Islam.

Despite facing tremendous persecution, I managed to excel in school and was admitted to law school. I was an active member of the Student Union in college, which challenged the current system and favored democracy. Questioning the practices of the school or government was viewed as "anti-government."

The war escalated in the late 1990s and, as both a minority in northern Sudan and an outspoken member of the Student Union, I was particularly at risk. I lived in fear of the Sudanese government and its sympathizers, including my neighbors. I had to quit school and live in hiding, fearing for my life.

In 1997, the Student Union held demonstrations to fight for democracy. At one of the demonstrations, a man right in front of me was shot by the Sudanese military. The government ordered the military to stop these demonstrations by any means. I lost brilliant colleagues and beloved friends.

Luckily, I made it to the United States in September 1998. Because of the danger I faced if forced to return to Sudan, I was granted political asylum in the U.S. This has given me a second chance to speak about the atrocities in my country of birth. I can sleep through the nights now without the fear of being killed or kidnapped by the Sudanese government or their army, although the nightmares have not stopped.

Today in Sudan, the Janjaweed militias, backed by the government of Sudan, are mercilessly killing the people of Darfur. Since 2003, some 400,000 Darfurians have been killed and 2.2 million

displaced (according to statistics from Save Darfur). Our children in southern Sudan and Darfur are suffering the most. They, along with their mothers, have been victims of crossfire, land mines, rape, slavery and human-created famine.

For years, I have been an active member of Save Darfur Washington State (SDWS), an organization of advocates who are outraged by the ongoing genocide in Darfur, Sudan.

Along with Harriet Dumba, I co-founded Hearts of Angels for Health-Sudan Initiative (HAH-S), a nonprofit organization focused both on improving health and empowering Sudanese women and men to overcome their traumatic pasts and learn new skills in conflict resolution.

My personal experiences of persecution and living in a war-torn environment put me in close contact with the needs and challenges of people around the world facing various injustices. As long as violence, persecution and discrimination continue in Sudan and beyond, I will continue to fight for social justice and human rights amongst the most marginalized and too often forgotten in our world.

For more information about this article, or others in this series, please contact the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center: www.wsherc.org or info@wsherc.org.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ❖ Agnes' mother said that "When two elephants fight, the grass underneath suffers the most." Read the article and then reflect on what this phrase means in a larger, global sense? Do you agree or disagree with her statement?
- ❖ Sudan has been consumed with war and violence since 1956 and it still continues today. Do you think the people who live there become numb to what's going on? Why don't you think world leaders and countries aren't doing more to help countries and people who are involved in modern day genocide?
- ❖ Using today's newspaper, find ways that the United States is helping other countries through aid, food, military, etc. ... Do you think the U.S. will enter Darfur or Sudan to help them? Why or why not?