



literature

chad

gretchen wallace

In the Southern stretches of the Sahara, the water only flows at night. Almost as infrequently as the appearance of fresh vegetables at market, dry pipes come to life sputtering and coughing wet exhaust like a tired tailpipe. It is 10pm.

Our five-man team is gathered in the courtyard of the tiny compound hidden around the corner from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) outpost in Iriba, Chad. Clapping with delight, we watch as the small dribble of water in the outdoor faucet begins to surge, and we scramble to fill every empty water bottle and spare jug. No effort is wasted to capture each and every drop in any available receptacle. We may only have an hour or less before the water once again recedes, and the mysterious powers at the other end of the spigot decide the daily ration limit has been met for this small town's enjoyment of the luxury of murky running water.

And yet this actually represents an improvement in our amenities. At our last outpost, we invested in daily water delivery from the local well via donkey. Leather pouches saturated, the miniscule horse would struggle to balance itself, heeding its master's stick and maneuvering slowly along the walls of the compound to reach the series of thirsty clay jugs.

The scene at most local wells is equally distressing: The crowd somehow maintains an air of civility despite the chaotic array of jerry cans, each patiently attending to its owner's place in some imagined, crooked line. Water is retrieved only with intense manual and/or animal effort—perhaps a donkey attached to a pulley, a pair of women hauling buckets or a crank that requires constant body weight to slowly turn. Each well, sometimes more than 20 feet deep, is dug by hand, strategically located in a wahdi, or riverbed to minimize the distance to the water table.

However, you needn't watch the struggling at each well. The truth cries out blatantly from the sun-cracked mud surface.

Here in Iriba, it has not rained in over two years.

It thus comes of no surprise that you cannot rid yourself of orange dust. Without delay, upon arrival your toes take on the weathered hue of one's favorite sandals. It only takes two days of attempted washing to realize there is nothing you can do. Only first-time visitors or the most experienced residents attempt to wear white, and it is not hard to tell them apart. I have certainly given it my best try.

As I wait for a used plastic bottle to fill from a now dribbling tap, I reflect back on our mission here. We are in Chad to bear witness to the suffering of the refugees who have fled genocide in Darfur. It is June. Since early 2003, when Government of Sudan (GOS) soldiers and its unofficially-backed "Janjaweed" Arab nomad militias began carrying out a campaign of terror against Darfur's non-Arab tribes, hundreds of thousands have crossed the scorched desert terrain to arrive safely in Chad. There are stories of children shot while they slept, babies thrown into the air and stabbed with bayonets, and women as old as 78 and girls as young as 8 gang-raped. One man we interviewed claimed his contorted left arm and leg which now hung uselessly from his body were deformities only transformed after exposure to the smoke of GOS bombs. Helicopter gunships shoot missiles filled with tiny nails at innocent civilian populations, while Janjaweed wreak havoc within villages, riding through on horseback, firing at villagers, destroying homes and food stocks, looting stores, torturing men and often locking people in their huts before burning them alive. It is a gruesome campaign of what can only be identified as genocide.

The refugees have come stumbling into Chad in groups or alone, sometimes with their flocks and sometimes even naked and barefoot. Enduring a week, a month or even three months journey on foot with six or eight children, they tell of sleeping under trees during sandstorms with no water to drink except that which might be salvaged by digging in a stone dry riverbed



or collecting from heavy rains. They do not bother with the thought of food nor the hyenas that stalk them at night. "We are facing death both ways, so there is no point in fear," they say. Many are forced to step over the dead bodies of other tribesmen murdered as they shuffle past villages recently attacked and burned to the ground. The wounded travel with the same determination, albeit at a slower pace, and others carry injured relatives upon their shoulders. It is a harrowing journey.

Today on the road from Iriba to Tine, the border-town crossing point for a majority of Northern Darfurians, we came across a group of six refugee women who were making a four day one-way trip on foot from Iridimi Camp to the border of Sudan. They had left their belongings in suitcases under a tree nearly a year and a half ago. They had finally been able to borrow enough donkeys to hold their week's worth of food and water so that they could make the trip to check on their luggage. Of course they did not intend on bringing anything back with them. They are still waiting for the day when they can permanently return to Sudan.

We have come to hear their stories, to honor their suffering and to bring their messages back home to a West that frequently seems both ignorant of the conflict and weary of yet another African travesty. The suffering and devastation are unimaginable, but this time, this time we can stop it before it is too late. That is, if we are willing to step forward and take responsibility for the fate of approximately 6 million Darfurians. The question is, do we see them as strangers or can we see them as brothers and sisters—beings that inhabit the same earth who happen to live a less fortunate life than we just 6000 or so miles to the East?

One of many stories now etched in my mind is that of Asha, a twenty-something refugee from Kounoungo Camp. Asha was in her family's fields planting at about 6am when the Janjaweed arrived in her village. They began to round up their livestock to steal. When her brother resisted, they shot him in the head in front of her eyes. She was unable to return to her village to collect any of her belongings and fled carrying her dead grandfather across her shoulders and pulling her dead brother by the arm until she could reach a tree for shelter where she could leave them at their final resting place. She is in this camp alone, longing to be reunited with her parents who she believes to be located in a South Darfur Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp. Tears ran down her cheeks as she recounted her story and offered her greatest dream of reunification with her family. Using her dusty garment to wipe her eyes, she quickly regained the stoic composure which is confusingly widespread among the Sudanese refugees when speaking of the tragedies they have endured.

This has been the most bewildering aspect of what our mission here has experienced. The beautiful people we have met demonstrate very little sorrow, almost no anger and hardly any fear. You will barely hear muttered a complaint. Most refugees are overwhelmingly grateful for the aid of the international community. When pressed about their needs, they pause to make small requests—perhaps another set of clothes—as they now only own one, or some milk or sauce to go with their food. A day later, we were resting within the tent of a refugee sheik learning of his flight from Darfur. When asked about ways in which he may have shown courage during his escape, he drew a blank and had nothing to offer even when prodded. Later as we casually asked about a large five or six inch scar along his left forearm, he mentioned without pride that he had been shot by the Janjaweed during the attack and had sewn his own wound shut with a needle and thread.

What I see as overwhelming modesty on their part and the subsequent astonishment I feel when I hear their stories may indeed signify more about the comforts of my own life than what it is that they personally feel they have suffered. Maybe they are used to life in this harsh desert climate. In fact most of those we met are farmers, who somehow, magically bring life from this dusty, stone-hard earth year after year. The wisdom they possess overshadows any formal education I have achieved when it comes to this environment. But this in no way lessens the unnecessary hardship they have faced and continue to tolerate. No one should ever have to experience what they have survived.

The greatest need in the camps at the moment, of course, is water; as the dry season ends, the water table is extremely low and there is not enough water available to the refugees, not to mention the local population. Refugees must now rely upon aid deliveries rather than local wells. Jerry cans and empty bottles stand at attention in long lines that stretch out from each of the camp's water station's faucets, waiting for the timeframe daily when the water will flow.

Food rations are distributed monthly to each family, but the refugees express it is not adequate to feed their families. They need milk for their children, and plead for diversity in their food source as the only staple food they receive is sorghum and beans. Those refugees who have not yet been able to officially register have to share the limited monthly rations that are provided to each of their relatives, further endangering their collective ability to heal physically and avoid malnutrition. Many make the dangerous journey back and forth to Sudan to trade or do odd jobs for extra provisions.

The refugees must use firewood to cook their rations. Initially



they collected wood from the surrounding areas. However, consider 10,000 – 20,000 refugees per camp collecting wood daily from a sparse desert climate with few trees, and you can imagine it does not take long to consume just about everything that exists within a day's walking distance. From what we could see, there remain only shrubs, many of which have been hacked up as well. The negative environmental impact is extremely apparent. At this point, we are told that the refugees are no longer permitted to seek firewood outside the camps. However, that which is now trucked in monthly by NGOs only lasts about two weeks, according to refugees.

In some camps there is not enough plastic sheeting to go around and in others, the standard issue tents are already deteriorating after a year or two. In almost all camps we visited, we saw refugees building semi-permanent mud huts. They usually construct dirt-brick walls using the earth that directly surrounds them. However, this leaves huge holes that children fall into, and when the rainy season comes, they will fill up with water and become breeding grounds for mosquitoes. Further, the refugees use their precious water to make the mud, reducing the amount available for consumption. It takes three days to build the cylindrical structure that will be covered with grass, garbage or cardboard, depending upon resources available, a woman explained to us as she scraped mud from a small hole with her fingernails and shaped it into a patty-like brick. As mortar or decoration, we watched her carefully arrange a set of small pebbles. Would I even know that I could build a mud house out of the hardest desert earth?

The most ironic thing is that the refugees have no opportunity to work, except in very limited cases, as refugees are usually not permitted to be hired by NGOs. Instead, the NGOs aim to help employ the local population, which is of course extremely important given the impact the crisis has had on Chad, a country with possibly fewer resources than Sudan itself. Resentment has grown between refugees and the local Chadians who bear the burden of lower water tables and fewer firewood and food supplies, and yet enjoy little benefit from the millions of dollars of humanitarian aid and services provided to the displaced communities. The local population is also in dire need. We are told by one medical service NGO that in some Chadian villages the malnutrition rate is above 80%, and occasionally Chadians will come to the refugee camps to try to receive food distributions as well. These tensions have made it necessary for the international community to take into consideration a balanced approach that helps address infrastructure, capacity building and resource needs locally as well as in the camps.

Every day I feel a greater level of discomfort as we make our

way back to our compound with our stash of food and our cases of bottled water. Usually I am not hungry—partly from the heat, partly from the day's stories, and partly because we only ever have oily canned tuna, bread, and processed cheese or macaroni and tomato sauce to eat. The local bread, without fail, always conceals an inner layer of sand, and the tomato sauce is bland without the spices I crave. And yet I know that just 15km to our west, there is another family eating their 2,184th meal of beans or sorghum porridge. Even still, there is not enough to go around.

At least our plastic water bottles are recycled. They could very well be plated in solid gold, by the look in the eyes of the children as they scramble to snatch our offering. "Cadeau!" ("Gift!") is a familiar cry from the children who line the paths alongside the refugee camps or wander in fields alone tending flocks of animals. The bottles become the prized possessions of those who now might have the means to carry their own water supply, provided they get through the line at the spouts before the day's water has run out.

“The suffering and devastation are unimaginable, but this time, this time we can stop it before it is too late.”

I can almost imagine their daily water collection routine, as I finish filling the last bucket before the water pipes spit forth their final offering. I realize that we have but a week left before we ourselves will return to the US, where such concerns for the most part do not exist. We aim to leave Chad with emptier suitcases, many of our belongings we brought specifically to donate, and fuller hearts overflowing with the names and stories of our new refugee friends. I also hope to capture ideas, the creative dreams of a population without any means to such ends; projects that with support from afar could make their lives just that much better.



Just as we foreign travelers are forced to innovate awkwardly to ensure our evening's ration of water will suffice for our cooking, drinking and washing needs, so too am I certain that there exists a wellspring of genius among a people that continue to survive unmentionable atrocities and depravation. All they need is a little more assistance. All we—that is, the broader “We” of the rest of the world—need is a little more compassion. The connection that is born out of one human being caring about the welfare of another ensures the highest response. May we embrace the suffering of our African brothers and sisters and treat them not as strangers. ❖❖

about the author

Gretchen Wallace's inspiration for her work with women in developing countries first stirred in her as a child when her military family was transferred to the Philippines. She graduated in 1996 with a BA in foreign affairs from the University of Virginia, where she attended as a Jefferson Scholar. She returned for her MBA at the Tuck School at Dartmouth College, where she was the student founder of Tuck's Allwin Initiative for Corporate Citizenship. In 2005 she established Global Grassroots, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, which invests in social entrepreneurs working for women's rights in developing countries. Gretchen is co-author of her brother's forthcoming memoirs to be published by Public Affairs Books in 2007. She is also engaged in making a documentary film about the crisis, *The Devil Came on Horseback*, a project of Break-Thru Films produced in association with Global Grassroots.

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Her Circle Ezine
P.O. Box 7785
Ann Arbor, MI 48107

www.hercircleezine.com

