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Op-Ed Columnist

**Trailing George Clooney**

By [NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/opinion/editorialsandoped/oped/columnists/nicholasdkristof/index.html?inline=nyt-per)

NEAR THE CHAD-SUDAN BORDER

I was going to begin this column with a 13-year-old Chadian boy crippled by a bullet in his left knee, but my hunch is that you might be more interested in hearing about another person on the river bank beside the boy: George Clooney.

Mr. Clooney flew in with me to the little town of Dogdoré, along the border with Darfur, Sudan, to see how the region is faring six years after the Darfur genocide began. Mr. Clooney figured that since cameras follow him everywhere, he might as well redirect some of that spotlight to people who need it more.

It didn’t work perfectly: No paparazzi showed up. But, hey, it has kept you reading at least this far into yet another hand-wringing column about Darfur, hasn’t it?

So I’ll tell you what. You read my columns about Darfur from this trip, and I’ll give you the scoop on every one of Mr. Clooney’s wild romances and motorcycle accidents in this remote nook of Africa. You’ll read it here way before The National Enquirer has it, but only if you wade through paragraphs of genocide.

The Darfur conflict has now lasted longer than World War II, but this year could be a turning point — provided that President Obama shows leadership and that the world backs up the International Criminal Court’s expected arrest warrant for Sudan’s president, Omar Hassan al-Bashir.

The stakes are evident in this little market town of Dogdoré, whose normal population of just a few thousand has swelled to 28,000 desperate, fearful people driven from smaller villages. They don’t think it’s safe here, but they find some reassurance in numbers — and leaving town isn’t an option, either, because flying out from the dirt airstrip is the only way to avoid rampant banditry on the roads.

Aid workers were pulled from Dogdoré in the fall because of violence in the area, leaving people on their own. Aid workers have just returned, but the entire town remains on edge.

One of the first persons we met was Qatri Ibrahim, a young woman who fled her village when the Sudanese janjaweed militia attacked and shot her 5-year-old and 8-year-old sons. “I’m afraid,” she said grimly. “But there are other people here, so I stay.”

In Darfur and eastern Chad, you can randomly approach any group of people and find heartbreaking stories. Mr. Clooney was clowning around with a group of boys bathing in the river — taking their photo and showing it to them digitally — and that’s when we met the 13-year-old boy with the bullet in his knee.

He’s Suleiman Ahsan, and he was wearing a pair of blue shorts — the only clothes he has. He also has a machete scar on his forehead; both it and the bullet date from a janjaweed attack on his village two years ago that killed his father.

Last year, Suleiman joined a militia and became a child soldier to avenge his father. “Recruiters come to the camps looking for boys like me to fight,” Suleiman told us. “Boys of 10 or 12 are old enough.”

Suleiman said that he learned to shoot but found the soldier’s life too grueling, so he deserted. Now he’s back to struggling to find food.

The International Criminal Court’s arrest warrant for President Bashir — widely expected in the coming weeks — has the area particularly on edge, for fear that Mr. Bashir could retaliate by using a proxy force to invade Chad.

The fact that Sudan’s state-sponsored slaughter of civilians goes on, year after year, in and out of Darfur, is a monument to the fecklessness of the international community. A spasm of that same fecklessness intruded on this trip with Mr. Clooney, who is traveling unofficially but is a United Nations goodwill ambassador.

Apparently concerned that Mr. Clooney might say something strongly critical of Mr. Bashir — perhaps come down hard on genocide? — the United Nations called me on Wednesday to say that effective immediately it was pulling Mr. Clooney’s security escort as he traveled these roads along the border. Now that did seem petty and mean-spirited. A Frenchman working for Save the Children was murdered on such roads last year, and the U.N. requires a military escort for its own vehicles here.

If the U.N. is too craven to protect its own goodwill ambassadors — because they might criticize genocide — it’s not surprising that it and the international community fail to protect hundreds of thousands of voiceless Darfuris.

Oh, and now for the juicy truth about all of Mr. Clooney’s wild romances and motorcycle accidents. Darn — out of space. Wait for my next column from this trip on Sunday ...

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/19/opinion/19kristof.html?ref=nicholasdkristof>

February 22, 2009

Op-Ed Columnist

**Sisters, Victims, Heroes**

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

GOZ BEIDA, Chad

So I’m bunking with George Clooney in a little room in a guest house here in eastern Chad, near Darfur in Sudan. We each have a mattress on the floor, the “shower” is a rubber hose that doesn’t actually produce any water, and George’s side of the room has a big splotch of something that sure looks like blood.

He’s using me to learn more about Darfur, and I’m using him to ease you into a column about genocide. Manipulation all around — and, luckily, neither of us snores. (But stay tuned to this series for salacious gossip if he talks in his sleep.)

The slaughter in Darfur has continued for six years largely because world leaders have been complacent and preoccupied. In the coming weeks, the International Criminal Court is expected to issue an arrest warrant for Sudan’s president, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, for orchestrating the killings — and that will give the world a new opportunity to end the slaughter.

But to seize that opportunity, world leaders will have to summon some of the same moral courage that Darfuris show all the time.

Take Suad Ahmed, who is in the pantheon of my personal heroes. I introduced her to George in her little thatch hut.

Suad, 27, fled from Darfur to a refugee camp in Chad five years ago with her husband and beloved younger sister, Halima, who is now 12 — if she is still alive.

Then Sudan dispatched its janjaweed militias into Chad to slaughter members of black African tribes — applying to eastern Chad the same genocidal policies that had already gutted Darfur.

Shortly before I met Suad two years ago, she was out gathering firewood with Halima. A group of janjaweed fired into the air and yelled at them to stop.

Suad, who was married with two children and another on the way, ordered Halima to run back to camp. Then Suad made a decoy of herself and ran loudly in the opposite direction, making sure that the janjaweed saw her.

That night, after the janjaweed had left, the men from the camp found Suad semiconscious in the bush, brutally beaten and raped.

Suad refused medical treatment, for fear that word would get out that she had been raped, and she didn’t even tell her husband, instead saying that she had been robbed and beaten. Yet she revealed the full story to me and allowed me to use her name.

I grilled her to make absolutely sure she understood the dangers of publicity — from stigma and revenge — and finally asked her why she was willing to assume the risks. She replied simply, “This is the only way I have to fight genocide.”

Ever since, in a world that has proved so craven in the face of Sudan’s genocide, Suad’s courage has haunted me. Thus on this trip I tracked her down and introduced her to George and to Ann Curry of NBC News, who for years has borne powerful witness to the madness of Darfur.

Alas, Suad’s latest news isn’t good. Her back, injured in the beating, still pains her. She doesn’t dare go outside the camp to get firewood, so she must buy wood, which leaves the family poor and short of food. Her baby, Abdel Malik, whom she was carrying at the time of the rape, is one and a half years old and was just hospitalized for malnutrition.

The most heartbreaking news concerns Halima. Ten months ago, Halima decided to go back to Darfur to the camp where her parents were living. They had sent messages that they were sick, and that there were too many soldiers around for them to escape to Chad.

So Halima, at age 11, resolved to walk back through janjaweed lines into Darfur to rescue her parents and bring them to safety.

The girl disappeared into the desert.

“I haven’t heard from her since,” Suad said grimly. “I don’t know if she got there, or if she was killed on route.” Suad has spent a fair amount of money trying to call people in the camp to find out news of her sister and parents, but she has found out nothing. We tried with our satellite phones and couldn’t get through either.

This is my 10th trip to Darfur and the area around it, and people always ask how reporters and aid workers keep their sanity among such horrors. Yet the truth is that genocide spotlights not only the worst of humanity, but also the best — the courage and altruism of people like Suad and Halima.

So the most indelible memories I will take back from the region aren’t from my famous roommate on the mattress beside me, but from uncommon heroes like Suad and Halima. We can learn so much from them.

For readers’ comments on this column, see <http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/02/21/your-comments-on-suad-and-halima/>