Bittersweet Oasis

In Baltimore, an Uncertain Life for a Sudanese Family Who Fled the Killing Fields

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BALTIMORE

It is just a robe, an expanse of fine white cotton. But each time Ahmed Abdelhameed Ibrahim wears his *jalabia*, sweet, melancholy memories spill from the robe's soft folds. The cloth takes him home, to Sudan. It is a place that is lovely and rich and at peace -- the romanticized Sudan of the homesick refugee.

The spell lasts just a moment. In that smidgen of time, he can forget that slaughter, pillage and rape have overtaken his home region, Darfur, in western Sudan, where government-backed militias are accused of killing scores of thousands of villagers.

And he can forget, for just a moment, all the struggles of this new life, for it is foreign, forbidding and costly to be a refugee with a wife and three children.

The bills pile up. And Ibrahim can barely read them, even with a neighbor's help in translating them, English to Arabic. And he can barely pay them -- the rent, the telephone, the electric -- on his $8.50-an-hour wage. Back in the city of El Fasher, before the trouble came, he was an electrician. Now, he washes cars on a BWI rental lot.

"It is never easy," says Ibrahim, 39. His smile fades to chagrin. His friend James Chiracol, a fellow Sudanese and a refugee advocate, translates as Ibrahim says, "It is really very hard. But I have to hang on."

His wife, 36-year-old Wahida Adam Rahib, a woman of sharp features and sharper wit, gently rocks the 2-year-old, Mohamed, in the folds of her bright green head cloth and wrap, or *toube*.

She does not work outside the home. Child care would eat up her wages. So she tends the children here in their Baltimore apartment. Two bedrooms and one bath, furnished with hand-me-downs and plastic flowers. It is nothing like Sudan, a place that seems even sweeter as a memory.

In the apartment of Omayma Ahmad, the neighbor who translates the mail, Ibrahim shows off his jalabia one day, pulling it over his shirt and slacks. He stands in the middle of the living room and strokes the soft fabric.

"I feel I am in Sudan when I wear it," he says.

And he tells of a life when he rode his horse across the endless sands at the edge of the Sahara as a boy. And he tended a gray goat, his own goat, a fertile one who bore four kids. And he herded the family's camels and tended its plots of millet and nuts and sesame.

There was no electricity, no telephone, no running water or paved roads. "There is no such luxury, my dear," Wahida says with a laugh.

Still, once upon a time in Sudan, the family flourished in a place that seemed rich -- and now has disappeared like a desert mirage.

A Cause in Common

Ibrahim lay on the thick grass. Hundreds of others did the same that steamy July day at Lafayette Square, though they were mostly Americans, not Sudanese.

In the patois of protest, the action was dubbed a "die-in." And Ibrahim did his duty. He phoned his boss and said he had a very important personal issue to attend to. He climbed into the 10-year-old forest green Lincoln Continental he'd bought for $2,000, using money borrowed from fellow refugees. He drove from Baltimore to the District with three other Darfurians. And he lay there, prone on the grass, as protest leaders from the Sudan Campaign and other groups decried the violence in Darfur and called for international action.

And each day for a month, members of Congress -- Rep. Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., for instance -- other prominent personalities (Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield of Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream) and ordinary people (four District grandmothers) served themselves up for arrest at the Sudanese Embassy on Massachusetts Avenue NW. Just as campaigners of the Free South Africa movement did more than a decade ago against the old apartheid regime there, Sudan activists are hoping the arrests will spur change.

The protests astonish Ibrahim. He knows Americans don't know much of the world, at least not his part of it. And yet, they keep showing up to protest.

"Darfur is a remote area in a remote country, and people are protesting for the sake of its people," Ibrahim would say later with amazement. "That is a very nice feeling."

That day at Lafayette Square, speaker after speaker called the Darfur killings a genocide. And later that day, Congress would agree and officially label Darfur a place of genocide.

Not surprisingly, the Sudanese government criticized that action.

The allegation of genocide makes no sense, says Sudanese Ambassador Khidir Haroun Ahmed, considering that "more than 40 percent of the national army is drawn from these tribes" from Darfur.

The term "genocide" is in dispute, much as it was 10 years ago when another African nation, Rwanda, was besieged by mass killing while the world debated (and 800,000 Rwandans died).

The Bush administration has declined to call Darfur a genocide. The European Union takes the same position.

No one disputes that mass killing has occurred. What is unclear, though, is whether the killings were fueled by the intent required by U.N. Genocide Convention: the intent to wipe out a people.

For Ibrahim and Rahib, there is no debate. They are Zaghawa. Along with the Fur and the Masalit, their people are the targets of the killings in Darfur. To them, genocide is no abstraction.

Shifting Sands

Afro-Arab marauders, known as the Janjaweed ("devils on horseback" is the loose translation of this Arabic colloquialism), swept into the village of Koushainy, not far from El Fasher. Ibrahim's extended family lived there, and many died that day earlier this year -- uncles, aunts, cousins. The sheep were slaughtered, too. And the Janjaweed threw the animal carcasses down the wells, contaminating the water supply.

That is the account that Ibrahim and Rahib heard from survivors.

Though they were never directly attacked before they left Darfur four years ago, they lived with the specter of Janjaweed raids. And even here, they feel the terror of Darfur through the telephone accounts from relatives and from newscasts that show the carnage and suffering.

The Darfur crisis has gripped the world's attention. It ranks among the globe's worst humanitarian crises and challenges us once again to understand a distant, complex region, a land filled with words and names we can barely pronounce.

The Sahara, it seems, is the best place to begin. It is one of Africa's rumbling geo-cultural fault lines as its desert sands creep southward and ignite human conflict.

In Sudan, Africa's largest nation, the desert's relentless spread has pushed nomadic Afro-Arab tribes and their cattle and camels farther south in search of more grazing lands. And that has put them in direct conflict with the more sedentary African farming villages of those lands, such as Darfur, on the Sahara's edge.

That is where Ibrahim and Rahib once lived, in a beleaguered, desolate region the size of Texas. There are few schools, few amenities, few roads compared with Sudan's Arab north. There isn't even a road from El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur, to Khartoum. Amid the patchwork of African and Arab tribes and villages, Darfur is a region of Islam. Everyone is Muslim. And everyone speaks Arabic. In color, they range through the various shades of brown. Some of the Afro-Arabs are as dark as some of the non-Arab Africans.

Intermixing has occurred for centuries. But this apparently has not diluted the views of Arab supremacists in the region.

With an Arab central government setting the tone, some analysts say, the Afro-Arabs of Darfur have lorded over their non-Arab countrymen for years.

In the 1980s, a group known as the "Arab Gathering" emerged in Darfur and espoused the supremacy of the "Arab race," according to a report by the International Crisis Group, a conflict-resolution network.

Many non-Arabs feared the sedentary tribes of the region would be displaced by nomadic Arab tribes in need of land. That Arab-Afro tension had led to waves of violence between tribes on both sides over the years. Darfur has been under a state of emergency since 1999.

Then, last year, a pair of rebel groups exploded onto the scene to fight against the marginalization of Darfur's people. They were composed mostly of Zaghawa, Fur and Masalit guerrillas, and their first attack was a bold strike against a central government military garrison in El Fasher.

The government of President Omar al-Bashir hit back with fury -- not through its regular army, half of whose troops are from Darfur, but through its hated and feared militia, the Janjaweed. Human Rights Watch has reported uncovering official documents that confirm the Janjaweed's role as a government proxy force, though Sudan continues to deny it.

The Janjaweed targeted Darfurian civilians with a campaign of rape, slaughter and pillage that cut a hellish path through the region. Nearly 1.5 million people have been displaced, including 200,000 who have fled into Chad. As many as 50,000 people have been killed, according to the United Nations.

All told, some 400 Darfurian villages have been burned or otherwise destroyed, the U.S. Agency for International Development determined from examining satellite imagery.

The rebel campaign set this tragedy in motion, says Ahmed, the Sudanese ambassador.

"People are concentrating on the reaction rather than the action of who caused this in the first place," he says.

But the U.N. Security Council is holding Sudan's government accountable. It has given Khartoum until Aug. 30 to disarm the Janjaweed. Sanctions could come next.

Ibrahim does not believe the government is disarming the Janjaweed. And reports from reporters in the region as well as human rights groups say that many Janjaweed now are camouflaged in army or police uniforms.

"In 30 days," says Ibrahim, "hundreds of thousands of people might have died."

Ibrahim's parents long ago took refuge in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, as did two of his brothers. Rahib's parents already lived there. With the exception of a sister who lives in Omaha, others in the family fled to Abeche, a town in Chad.

In a chilling report from relatives in the region several weeks ago, Ibrahim and Rahib learned of the deaths of five cousins. The Janjaweed ambushed them outside El Fasher. The men were slain along with their donkeys.

"Dead donkeys were put over them," Rahib laments, outraged at the final insult to her interred relatives.

Friends and Enemies

It is difficult to discuss the causes underlying the conflict, especially in mixed company. For instance, Ibrahim's neighbors, Omayma Ahmad and Mubarak Mohamed, are Afro-Arabs from Sudan, though Mohamed's skin is darker than Ibrahim's.

Asked what is the problem between Africans and Arabs, Mohamed shrugs and shakes his head and says simply, "We are all black," as if the problem does not or ought not exist. He did not amplify.

And in his presence, Rahib and Ibrahim's comments on the subject are muted.

Later, Chiracol translated. He is not Arab. And Rahib and Ibrahim's bitterness became clear, prompting the question: Do they hate as much as they say they are hated?

"You hate somebody who keeps on doing bad things," says Ibrahim. "Somebody who kills my father, kills my mother, how can they be good people?" (He is speaking rhetorically; his parents are both alive.)

He even says: "All the Arabs are Janjaweed. The government are Arabs, and they're giving arms to the Arabs."

Rahib, who was raised in Omdurman, near Khartoum, feels that Arabs "treat us like third-class citizens."

She says, pointing to Ibrahim, "If he is to marry an Arab . . . the girl would say okay, but the [girl's] father would say, 'How can you marry a slave?' "

That is what some of Sudan's Arabs call its Africans: slaves.

Rahib and Ibrahim's invective seems out of step with their cordial relations with their Arab neighbors.

But the two couples don't discuss these issues, says Ibrahim. The neighbors aren't political, aren't involved with the Sudan cause.

Later, as she stands in the lobby of their building, Rahib seems to try to blunt the sharpness of their views. She points to the mailbox (where there are envelopes with words that she and Ibrahim cannot read without the help of their Arab neighbors).

Apologetically, she says of Mohamed and Ahmad, "Very good neighbors. Veeery good neighbors."

A Long and Winding Road

Ibrahim hunches over a map on his coffee table. He points to El Fasher, his home town. And he points to the spot along the White Nile where he began his journey into exile.

He fled the insecurity of Darfur, but, more pressingly, he fled a government attempt to force him into a national militia to fight against the southern Christians.

"Those people in the south are my brothers," he says now. "I am not going to kill them."

For his refusal, he lost his job. And when he moved to Khartoum, he was jailed for 40 days and tortured, he says.

On his release, he headed to Taiba, along the Nile, and boarded a truck that took him north to Wadi Halfa, on the border with Egypt. There, he boarded a Nile River ferry up to Aswan, where he caught a train to Cairo. Rahib, who stayed behind in Khartoum with her family, took a similar journey a month later with the children.

Cairo bustles with Sudanese seeking asylum. For some 20 years, those refugees had been mainly from Sudan's southern war. But Darfurians also had begun to flee the conflict in their region.

In Cairo, they go to the offices of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. They apply for eligibility for asylum, then they wait for an appointment to make their case. It can take months. It can take years. For Ibrahim and Rahib, it took three.

Their family grew while they waited, with the birth of Mohamed. Ibrahim worked in the Sudanese exile community as an organizer and advocate.

Finally they received their refugee status, and the State Department declared them eligible to enter the country.

They arrived at Newark Liberty International Airport on Jan. 26.

"For the first time, I see the snow!" Ibrahim says, laughing, though both say they suffered in their first experience with wintry cold.

An agency that sponsors refugees greeted them and escorted them to Baltimore, to their new apartment. They knew no one but their contact from the Ethiopian Community Development Council, their sponsoring group, which provided the apartment and the rent for several months.

And then they met Chiracol, who is a kind of nexus for Sudanese refugees in the area. Though he works for a refugee services group, he is not a caseworker for Ibrahim and Rahib. Just a guardian angel.

He helped them apply for food stamps, to contact schools and organized donations from the small Sudanese community to help Ibrahim buy his car.

The community is like that -- its members help pull each other along, even across religious and ethnic lines. Like Ahmad, the Arab, who helps them. Like the Sudanese Christians to whom Sudanese Muslims gave donations for an Easter feast.

Ibrahim doesn't have much to give. But he drives people, for instance, to prayer at a local mosque.

Through word of mouth, Ibrahim heard about a job opening. Three months ago, he started work: washing cars for the National and Alamo rental car lots at BWI. He will receive health insurance for the family after six months on the job.

Cloaked in Sadness

What passes for normalcy, in the United States, is slowly settling over this Sudanese family. Work. Cable TV. Health insurance.

It does not escape Ibrahim that he is quite fortunate compared with those in Darfur, where some people "aren't even able to get a cup of water," he says.

"In America, I may have everything, but I'm not going to be happy because of all the people I know who are suffering."

And he will always be a foreigner, caught between a new home and a home he longs for but is gone.

He can be forgiven for holding tight to the romance of his jalabia, to the memories of his gray goat, of his horse racing across the sands.

That is the hurting part, the yearning part. He describes it in an English word that he himself speaks.

The pain, he says sadly, is "very."