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A Sister's Sacrifice

By Nicholas D. Kristof

GOZ AMIR, Chad

When the janjaweed militia attacked Fareeda, a village here in southeastern Chad near Darfur, an elderly man named Simih Yahya didn't run because that would have meant leaving his frail wife behind. So the janjaweed grabbed Mr. Simih and, shouting insults against blacks, threw him to the ground and piled grass on his back.

Then they started a bonfire on top of him.

But his wife, Halima, normally fragile and submissive, furiously tried to tug the laughing militia members from her husband. She pleaded with them to spare his life. Finally, she threw herself on top of the fire, burning herself but eventually extinguishing it with her own body.

The janjaweed may have been shamed by her courage, for Mr. Simih recalls them then walking away and saying, "Oh, he will die anyway." He told me the story as he was treated at a hospital where doctors peeled burned flesh from his back.

Atrocities like this make up the news and constitute the Sudanese-sponsored genocide here in the region surrounding Darfur, but it is also stories like this — of superhuman courage — that keep me going through my reporting here. Invariably, the most memorable stories to emerge from genocide aren't those of the Adolf Eichmanns, but those of the Anne Franks and Raoul Wallenbergs. Side by side with the most nauseating evil, you stumble across the most exhilarating humanity.

So this is a column about the uplifting side of genocide.

I see examples all the time, from the aid workers who persevere against impossible odds (13 have been murdered in Darfur since May) to the children who carry bows and arrows to try to protect their parents from men with machine guns.

One of the most inspiring people here is Suad Ahmed, a 25-year-old mother of two from Darfur. She lives here in the Goz Amir refugee camp, and last month she was collecting firewood with her beloved little sister, Halima, when a band of janjaweed ambushed them.

The janjaweed regularly attack women and girls — part of a Sudanese policy of rape to terrorize and drive away black African tribes — and Ms. Suad knew how brutal the attacks are. A 12-year-old neighbor girl had been kidnapped by the janjaweed and gang-raped for a week; the girl's legs were pulled so far apart that she is now crippled.

But Ms. Suad's thoughts were only for her sister, who is just 10. "You are a virgin, and you must escape," she told her. "Run! I'll let myself be captured, but you must run and escape."

The local culture is such that if the little girl were raped, she might never be able to marry. So Ms. Suad made herself a decoy and allowed herself to be caught, while her sister escaped back to the camp.

Ms. Suad plays down her heroism, saying that even if she had tried to escape, she might have been caught anyway, for she was five months pregnant. Or, she says, maybe she and her sister both would have been captured.

In any case, however, the janjaweed beat Ms. Suad, and seven of them gang-raped her despite her pregnancy. "You black people have no land," she recalls them telling her. "This land is not for you."

People from the camp found Ms. Suad in the hills that evening, too injured to walk, and carried her back. Ms. Suad said she didn't seek medical treatment, because she wanted to keep the rape as much of a secret as possible and didn't even tell her husband, although he eventually found out along with a few others. He accepted that it was not her fault.

(She found the courage to give an [on-the-record interview that was videotaped](#), after a tribal leader told her that it might help other Darfuris if the world knew what was happening to women here.)

The gang rape and beating were excruciating, she says, but her sacrifice was worth it. "When my sister saw me brought back and saw what had happened to me, she understood," Ms. Suad says. "She is very grateful to me."

So, yes, this is a land of numbing brutality, scarred by what may be the ugliest crime of all, genocide — abetted by indifference abroad. But it has elicited the best of humanity along with the worst. In Ms. Suad and those like her, I find a courage, nobility and compassion that offer a perfect contrast to the fecklessness of the rest of the world.

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