

## **A Cry for Respect in a Sudan Camp**

Driven to Desperation, Children Took Aid Workers Hostage

*By Emily Wax*

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KALMA CAMP, Sudan -- Boys in tattered clothes were waiting in food lines, girls were hauling water on donkeys, crippled orphans were begging on crutches. Suddenly, a call went out across this vast camp of stick-and-rag huts filled with civilians displaced by the conflict in Darfur. Abandoning their routines, thousands of children converged at key spots.

There, teenage leaders rallied the crowds. They spoke of the persistent lice, the filthy latrines, the longing for home among the camp's 90,000 inhabitants. They described a humiliating incident that morning in which a camp leader had been beaten and dragged off by Sudanese troops amid contradictory explanations.

And then they made a proposal that both shocked and exhilarated the gathered adolescents: that they kidnap humanitarian aid workers to protest their miserable conditions.

"It was a scary idea," said Nazira Sulliman, 12, who attended one of the rallies. "Many of us had never done anything that wrong. But it also made us feel strong."

Abdullah Mussa Issa, 16, was one of the youths who goaded the others to action. "Our fathers are dead. Our mothers are humiliated. Our animals and properties are stolen," he said he told his friends. "Can we let this stuff keep happening to us?"

On that afternoon two months ago, mobs of angry youths surrounded a health post, waving knives and sticks and chanting, "Revenge!" Inside were at least 32 Sudanese and international aid workers.

Several youth leaders told them they would be held hostage there until the government released the detained camp leader, Sheik Suliman Ahmed Taha, participants recounted. "No one really wanted to hurt the aid workers. We just wanted someone to pay attention to us," Issa said. Taha's detention also triggered separate violence between angry camp residents and security forces, including some civilians in the camp who fired gunshots in the air, aid workers and participants said later.

After three days of negotiations, the hostages were released unharmed, and so was Taha, though he was later detained again and is still in jail.

But the unprecedented armed threat from the children of Darfur illustrated how a passive, victimized generation of young people, driven from their villages and confined in camps, could suddenly become a dangerous mob.

"Okay, it wasn't really the so-called 'right thing to do,' " said Al Tieb Mohammed Adam, 27, a charismatic youth leader in Kalma. "But here we are living in this horrid camp with no money,

no hope for marriage, no security to go home. The jobless youth of Darfur are angry. We are sick and we are rising."

### **'Animals in a Cage'**

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Across Africa, an estimated 18 million children are growing up in impoverished camps like Kalma. They are refugees from fighting in parts of Uganda, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and Congo as well as Sudan, according to the U.N. High Commission for Refugees.

The Darfur conflict has driven nearly 2 million people into camps since 2003, when groups of mostly African rebels launched an uprising, protesting discrimination by the Arab-dominated government. Authorities responded by bombing villages and arming Arab militiamen, known as Janjaweed, who looted and burned villages.

More than 60 percent of the displaced Darfurians are children. They are dependent on food aid, stripped of their culture, mostly uneducated and unskilled. According to the United Nations, such displaced children are especially susceptible to forced labor, sexual exploitation and recruitment by armed groups. Isolated and frustrated, they can become desperate.

"These kids are like animals in a cage," said Bob Kitchen of the International Rescue Committee, who helped negotiate the release of the hostages and now plans to open five centers in Kalma to teach children skills such as mechanics and sewing.

"The children of Darfur were living normally. Then they had guns stuck in their faces and were driven into camps," he said. "Something has to be done. Otherwise, there could be a lot more instances of hostage-taking or worse."

### **Respect by the Gun**

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Before Issa's family came to Kalma, they were prosperous farmers with four thatched huts, a wide patch of fertile land to grow groundnuts, pumpkins and yams, and fields to graze hundreds of cattle, goats and horses.

Issa was a student, and his father had saved enough cash under his mattress to send his eldest son to university one day. "He told me he wanted me to become modern," Issa remembered. "He didn't want me to be tied to the land."

But in March 2003, they were driven from their village, Safia. Rebel forces attacked government checkpoints about 100 miles away. Then government helicopter gunships and planes bombed the surrounding region. Soon, the Janjaweed galloped in on camelback, set the village on fire and shot at local men who tried to fight back. Issa's father and an uncle were killed.

"My father's body was in pieces," Issa recounted, his voice shaking. "We could not even bury him. We couldn't get the savings under the bed, because there were brush fires everywhere. We had to run or be killed."

The family followed thousands of others, eventually reaching Kalma, where they built a shelter and registered for food aid.

At first, Issa said, his mother, Halima Hussein Ali, was hysterical with grief and spent her days weeping in their dark shelter. But she slowly accepted her husband's death and said she hoped Issa would come to accept it, too.

Instead, the events of Oct. 23 turned the studious youth in a radical new direction. As he was riding his rickety bicycle past the International Rescue Committee's medical clinic, where Taha worked, he saw Taha facedown in the sand. Government security officers were hitting his head with gun butts.

"Something in me collapsed," Issa recalled in a whisper. "I saw my father's image and was thinking of all the pain he was in when he was killed."

Later that day, Issa joined the crowd that had formed to take the hostages. Many were friends. The boys slept in plastic chairs in the sun; the girls hunched over charcoal fires, frying balls of wheat. The mood seemed oddly jovial, Issa said. That night, for the first time ever, he did something he knew would make his mother ashamed.

"I stayed out all night," he said. "I just joined the crowd."

During the chaos, someone stole his bicycle. The next morning he walked into his house -- dirty, haggard and missing the family's main mode of transportation. His mother was furious at first and punished him by making him do extra chores. But later she calmed down, put her hand gently on his shoulder and said she felt sympathy as well as shame for what he had done.

"It was a bad time," recalled Ali, 37, a tall, gaunt woman with long, black hair tied underneath a colorful shawl. "We were all feeling so sad. I tried to talk to him about the future and how doing these things would disturb his dreams."

A few days later, Issa told his mother he had been thinking of joining the Sudanese Liberation Army. The rebel group had placed recruiters near the camp who could smuggle fighters into rebel-controlled zones.

"I'm sick of this war. Let me defend us," he explained to her as they sat recently in the shade of a youth leader's hut. "I can be respected by the gun."

Ali started screaming.

"This war broke us and now, dear God, they are taking my boy. Please God, don't take my boy." Soon other women appeared and comforted Ali. Issa looked uncomfortable and rested his head on his chin. Shaken by her reaction, he said, he had a dream that he should stay in Kalma.

"In the dream my father asked me, 'You are still alive. What are you doing with your life? Why are you just sitting here? Why aren't you in school?'" Issa said.

He covered his eyes and started to weep.

"Just give it some more time, for your father's honor," his mother pleaded.

"Okay," Issa said. "I will try."

### **A Recurring Nightmare**

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The night before the hostages were taken, Nazira, a pencil-thin girl, had a nightmare. She was back in her family's compound of cone-shaped huts, with her goat napping next to her metal cot.

Then she felt an explosion. In the dream, she hid behind some sacks of grain, then ran to a friend's hut. Her mother found her there and they both started running.

"In my nightmare, I was being chased down and hurt," she said. "There was shooting everywhere. I felt like someone was stabbing my skin with sticks."

As Nazira recounted the dream, her mother said she wished she could help her daughter but did not know how.

"Her nightmares are like the things that actually happened to us," said Halima Ismail Adam, 35, who was nursing her youngest child. "I tell her we are safe here, but she doesn't trust. We lost our trust."

Since the war began three years ago, the family has moved three times, always fleeing attacks. During those attacks, Nazira's father and 17-year-old sister were killed.

She now spends most days helping her mother cook, clean and collect firewood. But she has been depressed, often unable to sleep at night and exhausted during the day.

"I really hate it here," she said. "There is no privacy, and I don't understand why we can't be in our village again."

The night the hostages were taken, her nightmares grew worse. She dreamed she was traveling on a long road that led out of Sudan.

"My family was all there, and I felt okay. But then we were bombed and my mother's face was filled with blood and scratches. And my baby brother was dead and his body was crushed. My lips were torn off and I couldn't speak. That really frightened me."

The next day, Nazira woke up late and was totally withdrawn. She went to collect water but then just sat down at the borehole and started crying, her mother said.

Over the next few weeks, she sometimes screamed for help in the middle of the night, wet her bed and then hid in bushes outside. Her mother grew so concerned that she started taking Nazira to clinics for help.

At one center, social workers and artists from across the country had formed a counseling group. Nagla Zakaria, a painter from Darfur, came to Kalma to help children draw pictures as a form of therapy. Nazira's first drawings were of fighter jets and burning villages; after a while, she began drawing African Union troops and people waiting for food.

When a counselor recently asked her what she wanted to do after peace came to Darfur, Nazira said she wanted to be a pilot.

"That way I can fire back at those who will be attacking us," she said in a sweet voice. "I want to defend my family against killers. I still dream that people are killing me."

### **Duty and Defiance**

On the day the hostages were taken, Hawa Issan Baker, 9, was at home tending to her mother, Kadja Adam Ibrahim, who was suffering from dysentery. The little girl wiped a moist rag over her mother's perspiring forehead, gave her a charcoal tablet to chew and cleaned her bedpan.

Hawa's friends, energized with anger, came by and urged her to take part in the uprising. Ikiram Musa Fudul, 11, remembered telling her, "You have to come. Today is our day to take power."

But Hawa declined, saying she could not abandon her duties. For most of the day, she stayed by her mother's side. She kindled a fire, swept the shelter, picked flies out of the water pot and forced her mother to take sips.

But as the hours went on, she said, more friends pressured her to join their rebellion.

Finally, swept up in the defiant mood, she left her mother under an adult's care. Meeting Ikiram at the entrance of the camp, Hawa told her friend she didn't want to see the hostages, but she suggested the two could slip away from camp and spend a few hours in the nearby town of Nyala.

"If the other children could do the kidnapping, then I could run away and do something bad, too," she recalled telling Ikiram. "Let's disappear."

The girls never made it all the way to town, instead ending up sitting in a field and talking into the evening. Hawa told Ikiram she was tired of nursing her mother and just wanted to have fun and play soccer. They fantasized about running away, maybe working as housekeepers or saving up enough money to sneak off to Khartoum, the capital.

"There we could live off the trash of the rich people," Hawa said. "It might be a better life than this. I hate Kalma."

In the end, she said, she felt scared and guilty and went home late that night. Her mother, afraid Hawa had been killed, asked her to stay close to home.

Hawa told her mother she felt frustrated. Two years ago, when they first came to Kalma, she had been malnourished and sick with malaria, and her mother had nursed her.

"You used to cook for me and braid my hair and buy me clothes and give me sugar canes," she said she told her mother. "Now I am the one caring for you."

On a recent day, while her mother napped, Hawa rode her donkey out to graze in a field.

"I won't run away yet," she said. "But I will take my small breaks."

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