

3 Students' Perspective on Tragedy of Darfur

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TV Review | 'Translating Genocide'

By [NED MARTEL](#)

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To build awareness of the violence in Darfur, an earnest if cursory MTV documentary decides not to explain the motives of janjaweed marauders, the history of ethnic tension in the region, the intricacies of an intra-Islam clash. Made by well-meaning college students, "Translating Genocide" never depicts a single militant, except in children's crayon drawings of the pillaging of their villages.

In fact, the three undergraduate narrators of "Translating Genocide" never travel to Sudan to make their case. Instead, they leave their American campuses to chronicle a visit to Chad, after they are denied access to Sudan. Once there, they record images and exchanges that demonstrate commonality and a youthful like-mindedness. The program is, at times, pleasantly facile, trying to establish that before the violence, Sudanese teenagers also liked to have a good time.

Such an idea plays into the weird contrast of MTV programming, where hour after hour of spring break rump-shaking cohabits with a respectable foray into trench journalism. The risk of such a juxtaposition is that it sends the self-defeating message of "Genocide: The Ultimate Buzzkill."

But MTV knows how to appeal to the raucous and the righteous in its audiences. The documentary will be shown during a sober Sunday-morning time slot and aims not to add to the headaches associated with that hour. For those hungry for more information, the documentary will be complemented by a 24-hour marathon of related news features and activist profiles on mtvU, the companion cable channel targeting students.

"Translating Genocide" can't be accused of an encyclopedic understanding of the crisis, nor does it instill a this-could-happen-to-you fear. But genuine emotions are captured on tape as respectful visitors empathize with traumatized refugees. "The world really is kind of small," one of the students says, mid-epiphany about mutual tastes in music.

One narrator, Stephanie Nyombayire, left Rwanda and is a student at Swarthmore. She stands as a hopeful figure to exiles from another war-torn nation. A Sudanese refugee notes how physically and mentally strong she has become, implying that some benevolent twist of fate may strengthen the emaciated, haunted women in the camp.

One interesting subplot of the awareness-building enterprise is the unknown fate of Solemon, the students' Sudanese guide in the camp. Solemon's relatives warn him about cooperating with the Americans, saying that resentment from other refugees is fomenting and that a huge letdown will ensue when the documentarians decamp. The Americans fret about Solemon's plea for a ticket to the United States, but really the focus is on how the Americans feel Solemon's pain. "Everyone we meet we're leaving behind," says Andrew Karlsruher, a Boston University sophomore and a narrator. "You feel pretty helpless."

MTV tried something similar in Cameron Diaz's sweet-and-simple cross-cultural exchange, a reality series last spring called "Trippin." Her lessons about sustainable development were similarly soft-pedaled, and in both shows, indigenous hosts burst into song as an uplifting coda to geopolitical bummers. Still, like college, such programming is an admirable start, challenging channel-flippers to consider the more immediate problems of less-privileged youths.

Translating Genocide

Three Students Journey to Sudan

MTV, Sunday at 11 a.m., Eastern and Pacific times; 10 a.m., Central time.

Directed by Kirsten Dirksen; Ross Martin and Stephen K. Friedman, executive producers; produced by Amy Emmerich; edited and produced by Rebecca Gwynne; Andrew Karlsruher, second camera/field producer. Presented by mtvU.

WITH: Stephanie Nyombayire, Nate Wright and Andrew Karlsruher.