

Sudanese refugees feel unique connection to Iowa

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by Jens Krogstad

Iowa holds an unexpected place in the hearts of many Sudanese now living in the U.S.: Two Iowa college campuses that helped shape the life of a rebel war hero helps make Des Moines a natural choice for the national gathering, Sudanese refugees said.

Refugee leaders, led by Darfur human rights activist Hawa Salih, have sounded an alarm about violence in three regions wedged between Sudan and the newly independent South Sudan. Violence also continues in Darfur, a large western region of the country that has been the site of genocide in recent years.

"In Darfur right now, they're still killing people and they're still raping the women. This is what has happened in the last three weeks; it has happened again," said Salih, who received a 2012 International Women of Courage award from the U.S. State Department.

Since May 2011, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir has been accused of ordering political executions and the of bombing refugee settlements, oil installations and United Nations compounds. More than a half-million civilians have been displaced or fled the Sudanese military attacks, according to United to End Genocide, a non-profit in Washington, D.C.

Al-Bashir, now wanted for war crimes by an international criminal court, agreed to a fragile peace in 2005 with John Garang, former leader of Sudan People's Liberation Army. The accord ended more than two decades of civil war.

Garang earned an economics degree from Iowa's Grinnell College in 1969, and a master's and doctorate from Iowa State University a decade later. Garang, who died in a helicopter crash in 2005 shortly after he became vice president of a newly united Sudan, looms large in the fledgling nation's history.

When South Sudan declared independence in January 2011, Al-Jazeera news reports showed ceremonies were held in the John Garang mausoleum.

"Many people think of Iowa as a place where history was made," said the Rev. Francis Chan, a deacon at St. Ambrose Cathedral in Des Moines. "When people hear the name of Iowa, they say, 'Oh, this is where John Garang went to school? This is a place I'd like to visit. This is a place I'd like to see.'"

Chan, now a citizen, arrived in Iowa 12 years ago from Sudan. He helped found the Sudanese Social Center of Iowa eight years ago. Dozens of people stream into the center every afternoon, located near Martin Luther King Parkway and Hickman Road, to watch Sudanese news via satellite and commune with others who have survived war in Sudan.

A central role of the center is to provide support for refugees struggling to pay for the burial of a relative, sometimes one they left behind in Sudan, Chan said.

"It's a place where we can meet and help each other and that arises in the community. Somebody dies and doesn't have family here. We encourage each other to make contributions to bury the body," Chan said.

The center also serves as a valuable political tool, because most Sudanese in Iowa live in the Des Moines area. It's a place where, for the first time, many of the estimated 3,000 refugees now living in the state can meet. Nyiel Duoi, 32, said the many dialects spoken in Sudan has made it difficult for people to gain visibility in Iowa.

"We are not being identified or organizing because we speak different dialects and come from different places," he said. "This center is helping make unity among our Sudanese people, and creating opportunities to meet a lot of friends."

As Duoi said this, he slapped handshakes with a man from Darfur. Duoi, who grew up in what is now South Sudan, has never traveled within Sudan.

Biong Arop, 38, said he plans to encourage young people to attend the meeting this weekend because he said the world won't step in to help unless Sudanese first take action.

He said the center has taught him valuable leadership skills. He's now chairman of the Abyei Community in Iowa. Abyei is one of the disputed regions under attack because of its oil reserves.

"If you don't talk about your problem, nobody (is going to) know about your problem," Arop said. "We need some help, too."

Full days of programs are scheduled Sunday and Monday to educate and raise awareness about violence in Sudan and South Sudan.

On Sunday, the event will feature a keynote speaker, Hawa Salih, a Darfur human rights activist.

She will speak from 1-3 p.m. at the State Historical Society of Iowa, 600 E. Locust St. in Des Moines.

Visit helpnuba.net for a full schedule of events organized by Help Nuba and United Sudanese and South Sudanese Communities Association.

Hundreds of Sudanese are arriving in Des Moines this weekend to raise awareness of escalating atrocities in their homeland.

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