

Darfur refugee, advocate speaks out, shares story
By: Arika Herron, Winston-Salem Journal
15 February 2013

It was hard to reconcile the words coming out of Hawa Abdallah Mohammed Salih's mouth with the woman standing on stage at Mount Tabor High School Friday.

Salih, a 28-year-old refugee and advocate from Darfur, stood strong and proud, smiling as she thanked the several hundred Mount Tabor students who gathered in the high school's auditorium to listen to her story. Salih's story is one of true horrors – of burned villages, death threats, arrests, torture and the systematic killing of an entire people.

"I am a witness," Salih said. "I lost 100 members of my family. My village was destroyed. I am a witness to the government of Sudan and the Janjaweed killing my people."

A survivor of the Darfur genocide in Sudan -- one of the worst humanitarian tragedies of the modern era -- Salih was forced to flee her village 10 years ago when it was destroyed by the Sudanese government and its militia known as the Janjaweed. Salih and her family had to find shelter in makeshift camps for displaced people. Ten years later, Salih's family is still there. She only gets to communicate with them every few months.

While in the camps, Salih became an outspoken critic of the Sudanese government for the "failure to protect Darfurians," she said. Her advocacy work has not been appreciated by the government responsible for the atrocities. Salih has been kidnapped and arrested. In 2011, she was arrested for the third time and held in custody for two months, during which she was repeatedly raped, beaten and tortured, she said. Salih was going to be put to death.

That's about the same time the Pittsburgh Darfur Emergency Coalition heard about Salih's arrest and began lobbying local, state and eventually national politicians to step in on behalf of Salih. The U.S. State Department took up her cause and was able to coordinate Salih's escape to Egypt. She stayed there for five months recovering from her injuries before she was able to come to the United States. For the past year, Salih has been seeking asylum in New Jersey. Her final hearing is later this month; after it's approved Salih hopes to continue her education.

"Education is the most important tool to change the world," Salih said.

Her belief in the importance of education is part of what brought Salih to North Carolina this week. Mount Tabor's STAND group – a national student group working on behalf of ending mass atrocities like that in Darfur – paired with a similar program in Durham. Salih spoke in Durham Thursday before coming to Mount Tabor Friday.

English teacher Laurie Schaefer helped start STAND and said bringing in Salih was a great opportunity for students. The group has brought in other speakers before and raises money throughout the year to help build wells in a displaced-person camp in Sudan.

"This is the first Darfur survivor we've had," Schaefer said.

The genocide in Darfur has gone largely unnoticed over the last few years because it's become old news, Salih said. She wants to make sure people know her people are still suffering, still fighting. She asked the audience to stand with her and call for action.

"I'm here today because I want you to cry with me," she said. "I want you to stand with me to end this genocide."

"Darfur needs you," Salih told them.

It's a message that resonated for many of the students in the audience, who gave Salih a standing ovation at the end of her talk.

"It was really powerful," said sophomore Jackie Lin of Salih's talk.

"She never gave up," said senior Kattera Logan. "She kept going and that's something I can definitely use in my life."

Salih received an International Women of Courage Award from then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and First Lady Michelle Obama last March for her advocacy work with the United Nations to strengthen the rights of women and children in Sudan.

Salih said she does not expect to return to Darfur in her lifetime. Her home now is here, in the United States, she said.

"But I am fighting behind all of them," she said.

© Winston-Salem Journal 2013