

A Step Closer to Death

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LI kids look at the face of genocide in Darfur

**What we want is a place where people can live like human beings.
... We felt that the entire world has turned their backs."**

— Yahya Osman, Sudanese refugee



NEWSDAY PHOTO / AUDREY C. TIERNAN

Yahya Osman, a refugee from Darfur, shows Rep. Steve Israel photos of life in Sudan.

What does the slaughter of innocents a continent away have to do with busy people like you and me? Not much. Not much at all.

On Long Island, Darfur has meant nothing. But perhaps it means a bit more now, as the result of what has become a personal crusade by Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington) to "start a ripple" for change.

Yesterday, at least 500 high school students and teachers listened at a town meeting about the ongoing genocide in Sudan — Israel's first ever on an international issue — at the Brentwood campus of Suffolk County Community College.

Children don't make international policy. And some of the adolescents at Israel's meeting showed the wisdom of that practice by slouching or snoozing before the meeting began.

But then something happened. It was just as Israel had hoped.

Students listened as Yahya Osman, who was forced to flee the Darfur region of Sudan, told of his older brother's murder.

How his parents and siblings were split into separate refugee camps.

And how, even today, he cannot communicate directly with them. He wants to, desperately, Osman explained. But the act of speaking to his mother, father, sisters or a brother would single each out for execution.

"What we want is a place where people can live like human beings," Osman said.



"... We felt that the entire world has turned their backs."

It's difficult not to pay attention to a story like that. But even the parade of politicians that followed held the audience, because surprisingly, they didn't talk about themselves.

First up was William Lindsay (D-Holbrook), presiding officer of the Suffolk County Legislature, followed by a dozen elected officials from Nassau and Suffolk. Most reached for Osman's hand and, accompanied by sober music, walked to the podium to drop small, but potent, anecdotes about Sudan that seemed to strike their young audience like hammer blows.

"Thirty young girls are abducted by the militia," Legis. Lou D'Amato (D-North Babylon) read about one camp. "They are not heard from again."

Students sat, eerily silent. Even the sleepest seemed to find no rest as speakers, one by one, illuminated a world where no child should have to live.

"Six children are burned to death in front of a father," Legis. Jack Eddington (Working Families-Medford) said. Then the father is beheaded.

As the morning wore on, students saw photographs and videos of terrible things.

They heard about men and

women in refugee camps where there is no wood to cook food brought in by relief groups.

In one camp, women must walk five miles to get wood. Men don't go because the militia will kill them. Soldiers don't kill the women; they rape them. That's just one ugly manifestation of the conflict between the janjaweed militia, aided by the Sudanese government, and the people who live in the western Sudan region of Darfur.

The Rev. Calvin Butts, president of SUNY Old Westbury, put it succinctly: It's all part of the Sudanese government's attempt to wipe the nation clean of a people, their culture and their heritage.

The students were listening. Some jotted notes on Web sites where they could learn more. Others filled out postcards asking President George W. Bush to intercede. And then came their questions:

Does the world ignore Darfur because the nation is in Africa? Why doesn't the United Nations step in, more aggressively, now? Why doesn't the United States government recognize that a genocide is occurring in Darfur?

The students learned enough to ask hard questions. While the rest of us, with our heads still down, kept working.

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Learn more about Darfur on Joye Brown's BLOG at www.newsday.com

"Where there is no vision,
the people perish."

TIMOTHY P. KNIGHT, Publisher and C.E.O.

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Darfur Day on LI

Event builds awareness of genocide

Yesterday was Darfur Day on Long Island. And it's about time that some attention at the local level is being paid to the world's worst humanitarian crisis, a genocide of staggering proportions that continues to unfold in that region of Western Sudan, with little concern and less help coming from the international community.

Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington), co-sponsor of a House bill to stop the genocide in Darfur, yesterday joined 400 high school students from Nassau and Suffolk, a Sudanese refugee, and community and religious leaders at Suffolk Community College in a day of education, awareness and activism. Increasing public awareness of Darfur's genocide is badly needed if the bill Israel is championing has a chance of getting out of committee.

Despite a cease-fire, atrocities continue unabated in Darfur's sectarian and racial crisis, which pits Arab militias linked to the Khartoum government against black rebels in the oil-rich region. As many as 400,000 people have been killed in raids or have died of disease and starvation; nearly 2 million have been displaced internally; and more than 200,000 refugees have been driven across the border into neighboring Chad. The bill in the House International Committee asks President George W. Bush to propose that the NATO alliance form a military mission to Darfur to protect civilians. Neither the African Union nor the UN has been able to put together such a mission. NATO could act more quickly if a political consensus could be reached. But first, more people need to be aware of Darfur's tragedy. ■

Walt Handelsman's view

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