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Inglis gets feel for dangers of life in Sudan

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Rep. Bob Inglis arrived in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum in the dead of night this week, only to be swept away to the U.S. Embassy instead of his hotel.

Cameron Hume, who is in charge of U.S. affairs in the North African country, wanted to brief Inglis on some sensitive subjects, but Hume told the 4th District congressman that the city's hotels are strewn with listening devices.

Apparently the embassy was the only safe place to have a conversation, and it was just one telling indication of what life is like in the war-torn country plagued by genocide.

Speaking by telephone from Cyprus as he was preparing to fly to Rome Wednesday night, Inglis, R-S.C., said, "Frankly, I felt safer in Iraq."

That is largely because there are no Marines in Sudan. Hume told Inglis that instead, American officials are protected by "local guards." Inglis saw those armed men -- in the backs of pickup trucks -- who "were hopefully on our side, but you just kind of wonder."

The whirlwind visit to Khartoum and the country's western Darfur region during the congressman's 10-day official Middle East tour yielded a rare firsthand glimpse of a country that, according to the United Nations, is home to the worst humanitarian crises in the world.

It is extremely difficult for a foreigner to obtain a Sudanese visa, especially if there are any indications of travel to Israel. Sudan is still on the U.S. government's list of countries that sponsor terrorism, and Osama Bin Laden used to live there.

Since 2003, a band of local tribal and other militias composed of rebel black African Muslims have killed tens of thousands of civilians in Darfur. According to the State Department, the "Janjaweed," as the group is called, has often received direct support from the Sudanese government. It has led to 1.8 million internally displaced people who must live in camps and defend their lives every day.

As Inglis visited some of those camps in Darfur on Wednesday, he described how young girls risk rape every time they leave the camps to gather wood and other supplies. Men do not leave the shelters, Inglis said, because of the certain death they would face at the hands of rebels.

"It's a tragic choice," Inglis said of a family's decision to send a girl into the wilderness, because they will often disown her if she is raped.

After meeting with the governor of the Darfur region, Inglis said that he and the other Americans were stunned to hear the governor's opinion that the presence of U.N. troops "compromises the dignity of the country."

"It's particularly lousy leadership -- corrupt, diabolical, bloodthirsty," Inglis said.

Despite continued U.S. sanctions, the United States remains the single largest international donor of humanitarian aid to Sudan. In April, Inglis convinced the House to approve legislation that would condemn the genocide, and he has asked President Bush to appoint a special envoy to the region.

"We need to be aware of what is going on in the world," Inglis said.

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