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Leaving Darfur

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There are presidential elections in Sudan this week—the first multiparty vote in that country in over twenty years. But things aren't likely to change in Khartoum. Omar Hassan al-Bashir—a man charged by the International Criminal Court with crimes against humanity for his suspected role in the killings of an estimated 300,000 people in Darfur since 2003, not to mention the displacement of millions more—will almost certainly remain boss. Which should, in itself, be considered a crime.

Not long after violence started escalating in Darfur, I had a chance to sit down with one of the first two Darfurians to have been granted political asylum in the United States as a direct result of the then burgeoning humanitarian crisis in the region. His name is Fadl Ibrahim Mohammed. We met twice in December of 2004: first at his lawyer's office (overlooking the crater where the World Trade Center once stood), and then at the apartment he was sharing in Brooklyn with several other men from Sudan.

The night he invited me to his home, all the furniture was pushed against the wall. In the middle of the living room, newspaper had been spread out over a portion of floor and cushions bordered the paper. Plastic cups and bottles of soda were brought out, as was tea in a kettle. We all gathered around the makeshift dining area and one of Fadl's

roommates set a large, steaming pot in its center. He tipped it over slowly, very carefully pouring out a mound of goat stew. The recipe was never discussed, but it was clear that it had been simmering on the stove all day, perhaps longer. For the next several hours we sat on the ground, eating with our hands, peeling meat from bone, as Fadl choked back tears and told his story. At the time, it was devastatingly fresh to everyone in the room, including the man telling it. It's Fadl's harrowing, 23-month-long escape odyssey that haunts me this week as an indicted president is about to retain his office. Five years later, Fadl's story is no less devastating and no more resolved. It appears here, for the first time, just the way he told it.

Until the conflict started, we lived a relaxed kind of life. It was primitive but everybody appreciated what they had. I bought and sold cattle, owned between 200 and 300 cows. All together, they were worth about \$2,500. If I'd go away for a couple weeks, trading, when I'd come back, I'd share the money: give some to my dad, to my brothers, to my sisters. That's how it worked.

I don't know why the government decided to bomb us, innocent people. It didn't make much sense, then, that February, to hear bombs falling in a neighboring town. It was close enough to Al-Muzbit, the village in North Darfur where I was born and raised, that we heard planes overhead, close enough that we actually saw fire and smoke when houses started to burn. We had never really heard planes before, or the sounds bombs make, but we knew from the fires and the smoke that a nearby village had been attacked.

By the next day—a Friday, a day on which my people tend to gather—we started to hear their horror stories. People from there, now homeless, spilled into our village and told us about being attacked. We were completely shocked to hear what they were saying. Right then we began feeling like we could also be in danger. That was only five days before we got hit. We thought about leaving our village, about going somewhere, but we didn't really know where to go and we didn't have an opportunity to think things through.

It was almost 6:30 in Al-Muzbit. The sun was setting. In our culture, during the sunset, people come together and start talking. This is after nightly prayers. Sometimes talks would be organized and we'd actually discuss religious issues or village business or schools, but most times we just chatted. The young guys would always talk on their own and the women would go home directly after prayers. With the young guys, it was always about money and marriage, but otherwise, it was telling stories about the prophet.

So people were doing that, like they did every day, when the bombs fell and the Janjaweed came and surrounded us and captured us and tied us up with rope. I was actually taking a walk on the outskirts of the village with a friend, about 15 minutes away, when I heard the planes coming. I thought, *Oh no, what's happening?* and then I knew: we were being hit. Me and my friend took cover beneath a big tree. The planes dropped probably six bombs, they were Antonov Russian planes. They circled back and dropped another round. Houses started to catch fire, but most of the houses belonging to my family were not in the center of town so they were spared.

Al-Muzbit is a relatively large village, about 250 homes. They dropped only enough bombs to destroy some of them including my uncle's. There was plenty of damage, though. By my count, the bombs killed 27 people including two of my uncles and one of my brothers-in-law. After the second round of bombing, I rushed back to the village where everybody was trying, with water and dirt, to extinguish the fires. But we didn't manage to put any of them out: the Janjaweed came too quickly on foot—while the fires were still burning.

Two days before we'd heard about these people dressed in military clothes who would come in and attack villages after the bombs exploded. This is the Janjaweed. No matter what the government says, they arm them. Almost immediately they came. Enough of them to surround us completely: 250 uniformed men on horseback and camelback and driving military vehicles—army trucks with communication devices and guns. They attacked before we could even recover from the bombs. Some people tried to flee. Much of my family managed to hide or get away. But a lot of the men were captured including me.

For no reason they killed seven people right away as they took us from our village. After that, they killed another ten and held us prisoner in their camp for about 25 days. Their camp was about 20 kilometers from Al-Muzbit and they took us there in their army transports. They had us tied with rope and threw us around like sacks of sugar. Once we got there, they tied me to a tree and beat me with the butt end of a gun. They broke two teeth in the back of my mouth. I remember one Janjaweed saying, "Why don't we just kill them all now," and another saying, "No, no leave them alone," and yet another saying, "Let's just beat them to death, beat them all until they die."

After about 25 days, they piled us onto a truck. They were taking us to our deaths. The area we were driving in was bumpy with lots of hills. Because of all the jostling, the ropes we were bound with slackened and I was able to get loose. Then, one of the guys ahead of me hurled himself off the truck. The guards weren't that attentive. It was late at night, they were upfront, and probably had had a lot to drink. When I felt that the timing was right, I also threw myself from the truck. I preferred to take that chance even it killed me because I didn't want to be tortured anymore.

I was not expecting to survive the escape—not because of the speed of the truck, but because I thought they'd probably shoot me. Due to the terrain, we were going relatively slow. But I still landed hard on my head and got bruised all over. Another guy had fallen on his face and was all cut up. Four of us had jumped. After the fourth jumper, they noticed and stopped the truck. They shot into the darkness for a long time. We weren't moving at all, just hiding under some brush. A while passed when I heard one say, "We must have shot them, they must be dead," and then they left.

I knew I wanted to get to Chad and I knew Chad was south of where I was when I escaped, so I waited until the sun came up and followed general directions based on its position. I walked for 20 days.

As I was walking through the grazing lands, there were a lot of refugees living in small camps. They helped me get to my family. I would ask them, *Where are the Zaghawa?* and they would point me in the direction. The first people I encountered were all Fur and Masaleet. Their tribes had been attacked and displaced first, before mine. As I got to various camps people would welcome me, offer me tea. They'd ask me where I was from and when I told them, they offered me direction based on the reports of other refugees. People had some simple things with them and they were all very generous. They would always share food and a spot near their fire. There was a kind of network out there.

Tina is in a border area. There's a valley between the two halves—the Sudanese half and the Chadian half. Before reaching Tina, I hit Forchana, which is a huge camp to the south. It's big enough to have many streets. I arrived there and the Fur and Masaleet told me, "your people are all in Tina."

When I finally found my family, I wasn't surprised because I kept hearing where the people from Al-Muzbit had ended up . . . but of course, they all thought I had been killed. They were overjoyed to see me, especially my mom who kept telling me, "I thought you were dead."

In Tina, each family would get a tent and everything was given to us by the organizations. Once every two or three days they would give us portions of water, lentils, beans, and a little bit of oil. They would truck in water, which we would keep in a vessel in the tent and we would use it for everything—drinking, washing, and ablutions. More people arrived at the camp everyday, but they always gave us enough.

I can't single out any one thing as being the hardest part of living in a camp. One difficulty was the lack of permanence. We all knew we had to go somewhere, sometime, but nobody knew where or when to go. Another difficulty was knowing our country was in ruins—men and boys were being killed, women and girls were getting raped, people had no food or water or medicine. I remember hearing about the old wars as a boy and I remember, when I would go to the big cities, seeing TV shows about them. Now I was living in the middle of one. It's hard to describe that kind of chaos, destruction, and devastation. It was all of those things that you could never even imagine.

At first I felt safe in the camp. I thought since we were in Chad nothing else could happen. But in August, I was walking with a friend outside of the camp and could feel explosions shake the ground. They had bombed us again—in Chad. That was when my family was killed. My father and one of my wives and three of my kids.

My father. My wife. My three kids.

After bombs killed my family, the Janjaweed came across the border and took us back into Sudan. Nobody had a chance to run away. We were punished, tied-up and beaten. They broke my ankle and beat us like hell. My grandfather was with me. He was 90-years-old, but they just tied him up with no regard for that. I don't know exactly what happened to him. All I know is that when we were unloaded off the trucks, I didn't see him and nobody would tell me where he was. When I finally got a hold of my remaining family, once I was in the U.S., they told me that he had died the day we were captured.

After about 20 days of torture, including getting dragged by a moving car, I finally had a chance to run away for good. For obvious reasons, I didn't want to go back to the camps again, or even near the camps, so I went another way

into Chad.

This time, it took me three days. Sometimes it was raining. Sometimes it was hot. Even when it's raining over there, it's very hot. But that's just weather. The biggest problem was my ankle. Remember, it was broken and I couldn't do anything to fix it. I was scared and couldn't just follow the main road into Chad—the Janjaweed were there, they would have found me.

I had to take the long way through the mountains. Going up and down, barefoot over rocks. I had on only a torn shirt and tattered pants, nothing else. Wounds and burns all over my body. I found a stick to use as a cane. I thought for certain that I would be found and killed. I prayed and I walked. I asked Allah to help me. I think he did.

On the first night of *this* escape, I found a donkey and rode it for a little while because I was very tired. There were a bunch of donkeys near one of the refugee camps. It was very late and I didn't want to wake the people so I just took one donkey for a short ride. But I let it go after only a short distance because I didn't want it to get too far away from its owners; I didn't want them to think somebody had stolen their donkey.

For those three days I didn't eat anything and only drank a little bit of water that was given to me by a shepherd. When I finally reached the road I wanted to get to—the road to N'Djamena, the capital of Chad—I just stood there and waited until, finally, a lorry picked me up.

The lorry belonged to aid workers. They took me to the hospital where I stayed for one week. I met a friend there—he's Zaghawa—and he took me back to another friend's house. I never felt safe in Chad after what had happened in Tina. Also, the police there, combined with Sudanese intelligence units, were picking up people and sending them back to Darfur. A lot of people were sent back. That's why I borrowed my friend's I.D., his nationality card—the one without a photo on it. I used it to get an identity card of my own—one with my picture on it, but with his name. Then, I used that to get a Chadian passport. It still had my friend's name on it, but had my picture.

When I finally got to Newark Airport, I was put in a detention center for five and a half months. It was both hell and paradise. Hell because I never expected a place like that to be safe and paradise because it turned out to be.

While I was there I worried about being sent back. On some nights when I tried to sleep I would see the people back home who died. It's difficult to leave them. When I got out of prison I got in touch with my mom. Again, she had no idea I was still alive but I am and I am free. Thanks to God I am here but I am not yet allowed to work. At this stage, I would do any work, any job, especially when I think of my mom and my two kids and my wife suffering in a very small tent in a refugee camp. I'd be very happy to work at anything because I just want to save enough money to bring them over. They have no one else to take care of them but me.

— *Howie Kahn*

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