saw was a man coming toward me in a ridiculously oversized jacket, rubbing his black-sooted hands, stepping through the smoke with its flecks and flame-tinged eddies, who had destroyed himself, yet again, in my name. The river was behind him. The wind was full of acid. In the slow float of light I looked away, down at the river. On the brink of freezing, it gleamed in large, bulging blisters. The water, where it still moved, was black and braided. And it occurred to me then how it took hours, sometimes days, for the surface of a river to freeze over — to hold in its skin a perfect and crystalline world — and how that world could be shattered by a small stone dropped like a single syllable.

JEN MARLOWE, AISHA BAIN, AND ADAM SHAPIRO

■

Darfur Diaries

FROM *Darfur Diaries: Stories of Survival*

From the Introduction by Aisha Bain

FALL 2003: I had started a master's program in International Peace and Conflict Resolution and was interning at a small NGO (non-governmental organization) called the Center for the Prevention of Genocide. Within two days the director had dropped a folder on my desk with the word "Darfur" handwritten in black marker on the tab. "We're getting some strange reports coming out of the region. Figure out what's going on."

Right, I thought. First things first — where's Darfur?

After reading the file and doing some preliminary research, I discovered that refugees had begun spilling into Chad in February 2003 — the first the world learned of a crisis in the neighboring western state of Sudan. Yet I hadn't heard anything about any refugees or any problems along the Chad-Sudan border. All the focus on Sudan had been on the long-awaited north-south agreement to end Africa's longest-running civil war. Many world powers were hungrily anticipating an agreement, waiting for safe and full access to the country's oil reserves that lay in the middle of the battleground for the past few decades. It seemed like nothing could interfere with such a high-stakes process, not even thousands of refugees marooned on the Chadian border in the Sahara Desert.

The Center's file also held reports of attacks, killings, and razed villages, but nothing had been confirmed. My research continued to uncover more alarming information: the government of Sudan had

closed all the borders of Darfur (it was uncertain exactly when), expelled the international presence from the entire region, and instituted a media blackout. I contacted Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) and learned that its staff had been made to leave the country, and a few doctors tried to remain behind to help. They had received some terrifying reports — bombings, militia attacks, people internally displaced — but asked that we keep everything confidential for the safety of the doctors. I began calling other organizations and found a Christian group that had been operating in the area which gave similar reports before its staff had to flee. I began to track down Sudanese people in Washington, D.C., trying to find some way to contact people in Darfur and get firsthand reports.

Then we got an unexpected visit. Dr. Tigani Sissi, a Darfurian who had worked as a local governor in his home district, had fled Sudan, fearing for his life. He continued to get horrifying reports from his people on the ground and was trying to obtain support from the international community. From exile in England, Dr. Sissi had traveled to the United States, certain that once people were made aware of what was happening, they would help his people.

He and his three Darfurian colleagues described what was happening on the ground. Arab militias, called the Janjaweed, were razing villages all over Darfur. Attacks included aerial bombings, villages being burned to the ground, the killing of civilians, people fleeing, government soldiers involved — he painted a picture of total chaos.

"The government?" I asked. "The Sudanese government is involved?"

"Yes," Dr. Sissi assured me. Not only had civilians reported seeing government soldiers and vehicles, but there was no way that the militias would have had access to the planes needed to carry out such a massive bombing campaign, he said.

He explained that when President Omar Bashir came to power in a coup in 1989, he struck an alliance with certain tribal groups and the military to promote an Islamic agenda. While this consolidated support for the government among some people in Sudan, the government remained unpopular with a majority of the population.

Darfur, an impoverished area with little development or infrastructure, was one of the regions that opposed the government. Having

fought lengthy wars in other parts of the country to gain control, the ruling party had turned its attention to Darfur. Its plan was to remove opposing populations by exploiting the region's tense tribal relations. Its support for Arab nomads in a growing conflict with settled farming populations began with the Arab–Fur war of the late 1980s but grew into an all-out war after an attack on Fasher by the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) in April 2003.

I took out a map. "Where exactly is this happening?"

Dr. Sissi pointed to his region, in the central-westernmost part of Darfur. "This is where I am from. This area is devastated," he declared.

"Where else?" I asked.

"We have reports coming from the north and south of Darfur as well. It is happening all over."

"Do you have names, places, villages, numbers of people — any facts I can use?"

"You can talk to all of my people on the ground."

I soon established an intricate reporting network. I was talking to civilians, rebel fighters, family members, anyone I could get hold of. I talked to a doctor in Darfur who said that his hospital was overflowing with burn victims, gunshot victims, rape victims, people who had been left for dead.

We sent press releases to the local, national, international, and United Nations newswires. We sent press releases to all the local media. We began calling all of our contacts in the U.S. House, the Senate, the State Department, various embassies, and human rights organizations.

I hunted down the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, NBC, ABC, CNN, the *Herald* — their foreign desks, their correspondents in Africa, the list went on and on. I left messages, kept calling back, and gave them all the information I was receiving. I offered them all the contacts I had — the reporters could talk to people in Darfur themselves. I urged them to go to Chad and see the refugees, or go to Darfur, and told them I had contacts who would help them and take them around the region.

"Thank you so much for the information. We'll be in touch," I was told.

"We're unable to cover this at this time," they said.

"We'll have to look into this, and we'll get back to you," they responded.

"I'll connect you to our news desk. Just go ahead and leave a message there," they said nicely.

"We've got no one heading to that region at the moment," they apologized.

"We just did a story on Uganda," they told me.

"Well, if it's not already in the news, it must not be a big enough story," they said.

A friend at my university, Adam Shapiro, was also interested in the region and had begun reading the releases put out by human rights groups. I filled him in on what I knew. He did some of his own research, and a few days later he came back and said, "Aisha, I want to go."

Adam, a filmmaker, had done his first documentary in Baghdad the summer before. I told him it was a total mess inside Darfur: the borders closed, the fighting intense, and there was a media blackout.

He looked at me and nodded and matter-of-factly said, "Aisha, there's always a way in."

I knew that people had been crossing the border with Chad frequently since the conflict started. I smiled, excitement filling my voice. "You are absolutely right! I will help. I've been talking to people all over, in Chad and in Sudan. I've got contacts with rebels and people who will help you get in, places to stay. I'll help you any way I can."

"You wanna come?" he asked, ever so casually.

We smiled at each other, and it all made perfect sense: we were going to shoot a documentary in Darfur.

Aisha and Adam were joined by another friend, Jen Marlowe, who had been doing nonprofit work in Palestine and Israel. Adam, Aisha, and Jen made their way to eastern Chad with the help of UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) puddle jumpers — small planes that can land on water — and in Chad they spent time talking to refugees in several camps. In a border town between Chad and Sudan they made contact with the SLA, the larger of the two rebel groups resisting the Sudanese government, hoping that the rebels would take them across the border into Darfur so they could see for themselves what the refugees in Chad had been describing. The next morning, a pickup truck emerged from the desert near the UNHCR compound where they were staying.

"Adam," Jen called to her colleague as two men in white turbans, djellabas, and Ray-Ban sunglasses climbed out of the truck. "I think our ride is here."

Fifteen minutes later, Adam, Aisha, and Jen were sitting in the back of the truck, being driven across the border into Darfur.

From Chapter 4: Destruction of Darfur

(The narrator is Jen Marlowe)

I was leaning against Adam, trying to warm my face in the sun. He tapped me and pointed. We were driving past a pile of charred stones. I sat up and looked around. We passed another group of burnt stones, built as a tight circular wall. There were more up ahead. It took me a moment to register that we were passing our first signs of life in Darfur, or what used to be life: round stone and mud-brick enclosures with charred conical thatched roofs, or no roofs at all; piles of rubble and stone; smashed or charred pots made of clay and mud.

"Furawiya." The young man sitting next to Aisha pointed, identifying the remains of the village.

The truck rumbled up to a makeshift checkpoint. Two young men with old guns stared for a long moment and then smiled, exchanging repetitive greetings of "*al-hamdulillah*" with our escorts. We were waved through. The truck stopped after a few more yards. We dismounted and silently took our equipment from the back of the truck. The rebels drove off with an unspoken agreement to come back to get us shortly.

We walked toward the nearest destroyed home to take a closer look. The sun was bright and the air was getting hot. It was quiet, eerie. A thin, tall man approached us. His head was wrapped tightly in a white turban, and his face was obscured by the covering. Only his eyes were revealed. They were intensely serious and somewhat jarring in a man so thin. His name was Musa.

Was he from Furawiya?

He was.

Would he mind taking us around and explaining what had happened to this ghost town that was once a village?

He agreed.

He slowly showed us around the village. The destruction was remarkably thorough and systematic. We passed piles of stones that used to be people's homes. Everything inside — clay pots, tea kettles — was charred or smashed. Sheets of twisted aluminum siding were lying on top of a heap of charred wood — former market stalls. Musa took us to the remains of one particular stall. It was his, he explained, and went on to describe how armed men on horseback had stormed the village and smashed everything.

Perhaps most disconcerting was the emptiness. Adam, Aisha, and I had been to other scenes of large-scale devastation. In all those places, people seemed to spring up out of the remnants the way weeds stubbornly grow out of cracks in the sidewalk. In Jenin, for example, days after the refugee camp had been flattened, Palestinians had created makeshift tents with poles and blankets on top of the rubble of what used to be their homes. New structures had been built inside, on top of, and around the destruction in Afghanistan. I had even seen a little boy flying a kite while perched atop a hill of rubble of what used to be the Kabul Hotel.

But here it was different. It was almost entirely depopulated. Besides Musa and the young men at the checkpoint, there were no people in the village. Even the birds had left. The only sound was the wind and the hard sand crunching beneath our feet.

Musa wove through the rubble and led us to the school. Desks were smashed and broken. The floor was ankle-deep in strewn paper. It was apparent that a school day had been brutally interrupted. There was still writing on the chalkboard.

"Who did this?"

"Janjaweed."

We exited the school and walked without speaking across a wadi. Musa silently pointed out a large crater. We peered over the edge. Remnants of a projectile were scattered inside.

"From Antonovs," he said quietly. "Government planes."

He led us to another missile, three feet long. It lay unexploded.

"Also from Antonov," he said.

Aisha took a photograph of the Russian lettering on the side of the ordnance. Russia was Sudan's largest arms supplier. Antonovs were Russian-made bombers. It wasn't only Russia, however, who was engaged in a lucrative business with Sudan. China was the largest investor in Sudan's oil industry. No wonder the UN had been so lacking in political resolve regarding Darfur. China and Russia hold two of the five permanent seats in the fifteen-seat UN Security Council. I wondered some more about my own government's response. The U.S. Congress had named the situation "genocide" several months before. But nothing had been done since.

Musa described the bombing campaigns to us. Enormous missiles were rolled out of low-flying government planes, striking populated areas with little or no accuracy or control. The villagers fled, Musa told us, and just kept going.

Musa showed us his own home, scorched to the ground.

"Where is your family? Where are the rest of the people?"

"In Kariare." Kariare, we learned, was the name Darfurians used for the refugee camp near Bahai, Chad, which the UN labeled Oure Cassoni. "No one is left now . . . They are all killed or had to run."

The SLA truck returned to get us. It was time to move on.

We rode for the rest of the morning over rocks, under trees, and on terrain that I don't think Toyota engineers had in mind when building their pickups. Jutting out of the rocks and sand were scattered lone trees. The driver seemed to enjoy guiding the truck under them, no matter how low-leaning or sharp their branches. In the early afternoon, the truck stopped.

"Shegeg Karo," the same young man told Aisha. "A market village." We climbed down, stretched our legs, and looked around. Shegeg Karo now seemed to be a makeshift SLA command center. There was a small cache of weapons and one young man with a Thuraya satellite phone who identified himself as the commander. Fadi jumped off the top of the cab eagerly and began to inspect the arsenal. Everything looked archaic. I compared the rusty weapons lying on the ground in front of me to the enormous unexploded missile we had just seen in Furawiya.

We were talking to the commander when we noticed a young man

shyly hovering near us. He seemed to be waiting for a good moment to approach. Aisha smiled widely, giving him confidence. He stepped up and greeted us in English.

"Hello. Where are you from?"

He was of medium height and build, with deep brown skin, warm friendly eyes, a wispy mustache with a bit of peach fuzz on the sides, and two small vertical markings at the corners of his eyes. His name, he told us, was Dero. The name was familiar.

"Dero . . . Dero . . . Do you know the photographers Jehad and Ben who were just inside Darfur?" Aisha asked.

Dero's face lit up. "Yes, they are my good friends! I traveled with them for two weeks. I translated for them. I helped them in everything!"

"They told me about you. I wanted to contact you, but they said you didn't have a sat phone. They didn't even know the name of the village where we could find you," Aisha explained.

Dero shrugged. He didn't seem to find the coincidence as amazing as we did. "I am from here, from Shegeg Karo. It is easy to find me."

We told Dero about our project.

"Do you want me to come with you? I can translate, help in whatever you need."

"We would love to have you come with us, if you're able," Aisha answered for all of us.

"I am available. There is no work, so I have nothing to prevent me."

Dero led us down a small hill into the market and sat us down in a stall.

"Wait here for me. I'll be right back."

Dero returned minutes later with slightly chilled Pepsis. We had no idea how he had been able to procure them or keep them cool.

As we sipped, Dero told us a bit about himself. Having taken two English courses years ago in Libya, he was now translating for the handful of journalists and photographers trickling into the rebel-held area of northern Darfur. He haltingly mentioned that his brother had been killed, but changed the subject almost immediately.

"Come, you can meet some people." We followed Dero through the market and the wadi, collecting more than a few stares on the way. The sand was filled with dried goat and ibex droppings. Dero led us

up a small hill to a conical thatched straw roof supported by thin wooden beams. Sitting inside was a wizened old man with a white beard and a wooden walking stick. From his hut we could see for miles around.

"The sheikh of Shegeg Karo," Dero told us. "He is very old. He knows everything about this area. You can ask him many questions."

The sheikh seemed pleased to see us and happy to talk. "My name is Ali," he said as he invited us to sit.

Aisha snapped a photograph of the stately old man, the last on her roll of film. She tried to muffle the sound of the automatic rewind as the sheikh launched into his history.

"The story of my home goes back a long time. Thirteen of my grandfathers were the leaders of this region. I am eighty-six years old. I know everything about the history. Whatever nation comes to my country, I remember. Whatever events happen in Sudan, I know about it."

The sheikh paused, his eyes gleaming as Dero tried to translate. It was obvious that we weren't getting each and every word. No matter, we thought. We would get the footage translated fully after we arrived home. The sheikh pointed to a mountain in the distance.

"My ancestor came to settle here when he saw this mountain, in the eleventh century. After that the Turks came. Hussein came. After Hussein came Sultan Ali-Dinar, in the time of the Mahdi."

The Mahdi was considered a national hero because he had defeated General Gordon, whom the British had sent in 1885 to conquer him. The Mahdi died shortly thereafter, however, and was unable to prevent the eventual colonization of the country.

"After that the English came. Under the British, there was no country called Sudan, but, *insha'allah*, we became Sudan. After the English left, we were still okay, but at Bashir's time they came and separated Arab people and black people. Bashir took the light-skinned people, and he threw us away." The sheikh tapped his walking stick on the ground for emphasis. "Omar never liked black-skinned people."

I wondered about his assessment that everything was fine from Sudan's 1956 independence until Bashir's time. Bashir's military coup was not until 1989; oppression and violence in both Darfur and southern Sudan began long before that. The Bashir government took

the brutality to a new level, perhaps, but power had been in the hands of a few elite tribes from the north since 1956. Regimes changed frequently, but always among the same privileged groups.

The sheikh began to tell us about the attacks his people had endured at the hands of the government and the Janjaweed, giving details that were becoming all too familiar.

"The government came first, shooting and bombing. The people ran away to the mountains to hide. The Janjaweed came after to finish. There has been nobody to protect us but Allah."

He spoke with great affection about the camels, goats, cows, and sheep the villagers used to own. "We rely totally on the animals."

He then described how the animals were taken by the Janjaweed, houses looted and burned, and how, on top of everything else, nature also seemed to be conspiring against them.

"The rains were short this season . . . and now the place has become like the desert. We are starving. We are just waiting for people from the international community to come and bring food. Only they and Allah can help us. The organizations tried to send food to us, but the government forced them to turn back. Since the government stopped everything, the people have to eat burrs."

The sheikh pointed to the burrs on the ground, which had been sticking to our socks, pants, hiking boots.

"Now mothers are suffering from hunger and don't have milk to feed their children. In the past, we were not hungry." He picked up a burr and rolled it between his fingers thoughtfully. "In Darfur, we were raised on milk." Dero explained that this meant that in the past, life in Darfur had been bountiful and the people were well fed.

The sheikh's hands were marvelous. Pointing, fluttering, gesturing, they illustrated every sentence.

"When I was young, the life was good. We were in our places. Arab people don't have land; they live on their camels as nomads. Arabs have been against the black people for a long time. In the past they were afraid of us, but now the government is helping them, so they come to attack us. Before, this was impossible."

The sheikh was impatient and interrupted as Dero tried to accurately summarize his previous statement.

"The people who fled from here are now in Kariare camp in Chad.

But I am strong. If there is peace or not, we will stay here. If they come to bomb us again, we will die here. We will never leave this area. We will defend ourselves." His hands fluttered with long, delicate fingers to accent his point. "We will die here. *Insha'allah.*"

Why was it so important for him to be here until he died? The sheikh referred again to the thirteen generations of his family that had been leaders of the area.

"They are all buried on top of the mountain." He waved into the distance with his walking stick. "My ancestors' graves are still there."

"Can we go and see them?" we asked.

"No problem. This young man will take you." He tapped Dero lightly with his walking stick. "He knows where it is."

"Will you come with us?" Adam asked, but the sheikh smiled and shook his head.

"I can't climb because I have bad knees. I've had this condition for a long time, but no medicine."

"Your walking stick," Adam said, pointing to it. "Does it have any special meaning?"

We wanted our documentary to show the culture and heritage of Darfur as a backdrop to the current tragedies. Perhaps people's personal items held cultural significance.

The old man laughed, deep and hearty. "My stick? The only special thing about it is, it helps me to walk!"

We thanked the sheikh and left him sitting in his hut, perched on a stool with his walking stick, presiding over a village that barely existed. Somehow he maintained a sense of dignity and purpose.

Dero brought us to an unscathed home on the outskirts of the village. A group of small children were standing outside the hut. They were very thin, covered in dust, and wearing rags with gaping holes. Several of them had yellowing hair. They stared at us in silence. We approached them, expecting them to be curious about us, wanting to play, as the children in Iridimi had. These children, however, retreated from us in fear. Only one little boy and his younger sister, bolder than the others, held their ground, staring at us. We knelt down and smiled. There was no return smile.

"*Salaam, habibi,*" Adam attempted to greet them in Arabic. The little girl started to cry, and her brother dragged her by the hand back to where the other children had regrouped, watching us from a safer distance.

I tried to understand the difference in reaction. While the kids in the refugee camp at least had access to humanitarian aid, these children still faced an extremely precarious existence. The children in Iridimi had also met, or at least caught glimpses of, aid workers from all over the world. We were probably the only foreigners the kids here had ever seen.

Dero took us inside the hut and introduced us to a woman named Hassaniya. She was wearing a blue shawl and cradled a three-year-old boy in her lap. The little boy was wearing only a dirty brown T-shirt. His head lolled about on his mother's lap. It was immediately evident that there was something wrong with him.

"What's the little boy's name?" Adam inquired.

"Tugud," Dero told us.

Flies were settling around. We were sweating. Tugud's six-year-old brother sat nearby, eyeing us silently, protectively.

"What is . . . what happened . . . what happened to the child?" There was no easy way for Adam to ask.

"His body is hot. It started like a fever sickness," his mother explained. "From the injury. When the missile was thrown, I was carrying him on my back. I was at the well watering my cows."

"Were you able to take him to a doctor?" Aisha asked.

"We didn't find any treatment for him. We couldn't get him to a hospital. The wound still bleeds. He has a problem with his neck. It cannot stay upright. It drops this way and that way."

Hassaniya lifted the boy to a sitting position and demonstrated to us the instability of the little one's neck.

"He cries a lot and he doesn't sleep at night."

The boy struggled to look around as flies circled his face, feasting on his eyes and his drool. He was unable to brush them away.

"How old is he now?" Adam asked.

"Four years old," his mother replied.

"And can he speak?"

"No, he doesn't talk. Also, he doesn't walk. He cannot sit. He used

to walk, crawl, and could hold water and stayed in the shadows of the tree, but he cannot move now. The injury is down his neck, here."

Hassaniya propped Tugud higher on her lap and tried to gently lift the boy's head, to give us a better look at the deep puncture wound just under his chin. It had scarred horribly. Tugud began to cry.

"That's okay," Aisha said.

We didn't want Hassaniya to maneuver her son for our sake. We were concerned that she thought we could provide medical help.

"Was she hurt in the bombing?" Adam asked Dero to ask Hassaniya.

"No, I wasn't hit. We were carrying this baby, and my clothes were punctured, but, *insha'allah,* I wasn't injured."

Adam made clucking noises to see if the child would respond. He didn't.

"I want to tell Doctors Without Borders about this kid. Maybe they could send someone out here," Aisha said. "If any NGO might be willing to take the risk, it would be them."

"No help ever comes to this part," Dero answered simply.

When we exited the hut, the other children were sitting on a woven mat under the shade of a tree. They seemed a little less afraid of us. When Hassaniya invited us to sit on the mat with them, they didn't run away or burst into tears. They merely scooted to one side of the mat and continued to stare at us. Hassaniya brought us a tin bowl of flavored water. We were being treated as honored guests. Water was extremely scarce, and whatever means she had used to flavor the water must have been in short supply. Adam, Aisha, and I weren't sure what to do. We didn't want to drink the water, both because of its scarcity and because it was untreated, yet we didn't want to offend our host or waste the water. When Hassaniya went back into the hut, Aisha offered the bowl to the oldest child sitting on the mat opposite us, a girl of about eight. She took it shyly and passed it on to a younger child. Once all the kids had drunk, the smallest ones needing her help, she drank her share as well. The empty metal bowl was placed carefully in the center of the mat.

We returned to the SLA truck. Fadi was washing his feet with water from a jerry can. We asked if we could interview him. He nodded,

neatly rewrapped his green turban around his head, and followed us to a shady area so that the blazing afternoon sun wouldn't make him look washed out on camera. The view behind him was spectacular — yellow rolling hills with patches of light green and clumps of bushes and trees.

"Why did you come to Darfur from N'Djamena?" Adam asked.

"To be in the movement. The Sudan Liberation Army. I've been a soldier for two years. I came here from N'Djamena because of injustice. I want human rights only. I want to liberate Sudan." Fadi muttered his words almost inaudibly. We hoped the microphone was picking up his voice.

"Liberation for whom?" Adam pressed.

"All people. Zaghawa, Fur, and many people . . ."

Fadi described, mumbling in incomplete sentences, some of the atrocities he had witnessed in the past two years.

We wanted to know whether teenage boys like him were forced to join the rebel movement. We wanted to know if children were being armed.

"I shot a gun once, during the training," Fadi told us.

"Have you fought the Janjaweed?" Aisha asked.

"No."

"The Sudanese government?"

Again he shook his head.

"How do the older guys from the SLA treat you?" Adam asked.

"They are good," Fadi answered.

"If you wanted to return to N'Djamena, could you?" Aisha asked.

"Yes."

I told Adam to ask Fadi if there had been a time when he was frightened.

"No," Fadi said emphatically. "I was never afraid." How many fifteen-year-old boys would want to ever admit feeling fear?

He told us more about his family, whom he had left in N'Djamena. "What matters most to me are my parents and my brother and sister. I'm the oldest."

We asked if he wanted to film a message for us to take back to his family when we returned to the capital.

He smiled broadly. "Yes! Tell them hello, how are they doing? How

are they living their life? My father, he is sick, and I want him to recover from his illness."

"And to your brother and sister?" Adam asked.

Fadi thought for a moment and then delivered his message:

"Their future is to continue to study, to be educated, and to be a teacher or director, minister, and president too."

"Do you have anything to say to kids in America, the same age as you?"

"Yeah. Students, go to school. Study." Fadi flashed a big grin. "Greetings from Sudan Liberation Army."

He wrote down his parents' names and phone number in Aisha's notebook. Dero had disappeared while we interviewed Fadi, but without much warning, we were told it was time to continue driving. Everyone climbed into the truck again. Just as we were about to pull away, Dero ran up carrying a tarp with his possessions tied inside, and he jumped onto the truck. And then there were eighteen.