



FAR TO HERE:
SHINING A LIGHT ON
DARFUR'S DISPLACED

● ALL PHOTOS BY KABIR DHANJI



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How do refugees from Darfur bridge the divide between memories of conflict and loss, knowledge of ongoing violence and their homeland, and beginning a new life in Australia? How has the journey from Africa to Australia affected them? And what do they think of their new home? Far to Here is a photographic exhibition that attempts to answer some of these questions. In part one of the exhibition Kabir Dhanji documents the lives of Darfuri people who fled the conflict in Sudan and are now residing in Australia. In part two Darfuri youth capture their own experiences, photographing their day-to-day surroundings. The result is a suite of images that spans the chasms between continents, cultures and generations. ***DANIELA AROCHE** met the people behind the initiative, aiming to bring the Darfur conflict and its affected people out of the shadows and into the line of sight of the Australian community.

As I sit and read the Saturday edition of the Sydney Morning Herald on a sunny morning in August, lazily perusing the week's headlines, a certain statement in the World News section catches my eye - 'War is over, says Commander of Darfur mission'.

"What?" I ask. "How can this be? Over? Impossible." It was only three days ago that I attended the opening of an exhibition to highlight the plight of Darfur and its displaced people due to the war.

And yet, this is what I read: "As of today I would not say there is a war going on in Darfur." The perplexing comment comes from General Martin Luther Agwai, the outgoing military commander of the joint United Nations-African Union peacekeeping force in the region; but his alarming statement is met by rightful resistance by JEM spokesman, Tahir el-Faki, who fires back: "I don't know how they can consider that war is over in Darfur. The war is not over. The war is over when there is a comprehensive peace agreement. They [General Agwai and Mr Adada] have taken into consideration numerical data about the number of people who died directly from violence [but] they have not taken into consideration the [internally displaced people], the refugees, the people who want to go back home."

Whatever the technical truth about the war (or lack of one) el-Faki's comments bring to light perhaps one of the most important and often overlooked aspects of the unrest in Darfur - its 2.7 million displaced citizens, some of whom have found sanctuary in Australia after having

suffered unspeakable hardship and traumatic events.

According to Melissa McCullough, coordinator for the Darfur Australia Network (DAN), the situation for the people of Darfur is uncertain to say the least and the political situation in Darfur remains tenuous.

"Since the expulsion of 13 key international aid agencies from the area in March, the humanitarian situation has continued to rapidly deteriorate on the ground," she says.

"The UN has reported that these agencies were responsible for delivering up to 50% of the life-line aid in the conflict-affected parts of Darfur, and subsequently their removal has had a huge impact on the health and security of the people."

To make matters worse, the current round of peace talks in Qatar has stalled due to infighting between rebel groups and an apparent reluctance by the Sudanese Government to bring an end to the years of deadly conflict in Darfur.

The aforementioned exhibition which I recently attended is a combined effort by the Darfur Australia Network (DAN), photojournalist Kabir Dhanji and the Blender Gallery in Paddington NSW, to raise awareness of Darfur's plight and that of its innocent citizens by documenting their experiences as refugees and giving them a voice. Perhaps more importantly it reveals to the Australian people the faces and identities behind the crisis encouraging support to end the Darfur crisis.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE, FRAME BY FRAME

It's a common saying that an image speaks a thousand words and after attending this exhibition those words once again ring true.

The photos taken by Dhanji are up-close, personal and moving. The photos taken by the Darfur children themselves during a series of photography workshops organised by DAN in both Sydney and Melbourne are even more so.

The project, was conceived by Abdelhadi Matar, President of the Darfur Community Association of Australia and founder of the DAN and photographer Kabir Dhanji. It materialized from small beginnings with big intentions and an overall desire by both parties to empower the Darfur community here in Australia and garner support for the cause.

"There was a feeling that the community needed a greater exposure" says Dhanji.

The Blender Gallery has also played a part in making the exhibition possible, providing a space for the exhibition. A small printed book is also available for sale at the exhibition - a collection of the children's photographs and anecdotes from the initiative titled 'Photo-stories from young Australians'.

One of the first things I read when I opened the small book of photo-stories was the introduction written on the left-hand page which recounts the reaction to the 'Far to Here' exhibition from one of the Darfur community elders. It reads:

"Recently we were sitting with Saif, an elder in the Darfur community, when he said he couldn't understand why the 'Far to Here' exhibition focused on photographs taken in Australia - "we should go back to Darfur and take photographs of what is happening there. That is where the crisis is, not here," he said, with a hint of exasperation in his voice".

This is actually one of the first things I notice when I arrive at the exhibition. The room is filled with photographs of people who have survived and escaped the tragedy, destruction and bloodshed of the Darfur conflict, but there are no photos depicting tragedy, bloodshed or destruction such as those often seen in the media these days.

Instead the exhibition portrays the Darfur conflict from a different

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ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Kabir Dhanji, the Far to Here project co-founder is a Kenyan-born freelance photojournalist. He has worked in Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Kenya. He has worked for the BBC (East Africa Bureau), San Francisco Chronicle, the Los Angeles Times, Le Monde, and CARE International. He has also worked on private commissions, most notably to photograph 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai, and Australia's world renowned swimming coach Forbes Carlile.

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angle, displaying emotive photographs of individuals who are now refugees living in Australia. Beside each photograph stands an excerpt from a detailed interview about the subject's own personal ordeal during the conflict and how it has affected them and their families, and their experiences on the long journey to Australia and thereafter.

The reason for this, as the photo-story book explains, is that "Australians are bombarded nightly with images and words depicting death, destruction and tragedy. Too often the situation in one crisis becomes more protracted and as evidence of its complexity emerges, the pictures begin to fade from the media altogether. Darfur is a case in point. Some estimates claim that 2008 was actually the most violent year in Darfur since the international community was shocked by reports of horrific attacks in 2003. Yet media coverage and political interest has remained lukewarm."

Dhanji agrees and says that the world has become saturated with images of torture, death and destruction in Darfur and all over the world. It seems there is a shortage of real, heartfelt stories and experiences putting faces to the destruction, but these photos give the Darfur people, who have been affected by this warfare, an identity and a voice - a way to be empowered - which is exactly the motivation behind Dhanji's photographs.

"The aim of the project was to move away from the traditional images of war and conflict, to try to portray a more human and Australian element, to do something different," he says.

"It would have been all too easy to include or use photographs of war and conflict. We wanted to tell stories of hope, and of new beginnings in an attempt to establish the Darfuri community as a part of the Australian community."

However, McCullough admits that it took a lot of hard work from both DAN and their dedicated volunteers and the artist (Kabir Dhanji) to bring this project to fruition.

"It was a lot of hard work. There were constant consultations with the Darfur communities regarding the direction and scope of the project. I think that's what gave Far To Here a certain authenticity as an empowering project for Australia's Darfuris to tell their own stories of survival, journey, loss and now resilience and hope' she says.

"The creative phase entailed taking the actual portraits and conducting the one-on-one interviews with the participants to document their stories. Then the exhibition had to be printed and mounted, drafted and edited and all the promotional material had to be printed. We had to execute a marketing strategy, set up the website and conceptualise and organise the different types of opening events across Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney. Of course, the powerful images of the exhibition had to be complemented with an advocacy campaign."

The event's aim of raising awareness of the Darfur conflict and voicing the experiences of its affected people was a success judging by the crowd which spilled onto the Paddington sidewalk outside the Blender Gallery by the end of the launch night, but there is still much work to be done.

This is DAN's second art-based awareness-raising project (the first was called "The forgotten peoples' project" and was launched in late 2007). Now that 'Far To Here' has come to a triumphant close DAN is focusing on strengthening its research and advocacy campaigns, finalising the organisation's high school education programme and ensuring more projects are in the pipeline to draw attention to the conflict in Darfur and assist refugees here in Australia.

"At all times, DAN works in partnership with the Darfuri communities of

Melbourne and Sydney and so community consultations, meetings and general discussions on the political situation in Darfur are a major focus and ongoing activity for our organisation" says McCullough.

"Before the end of the year we are also looking at setting up a community soccer team to complement the other community programmes we already have running, like the Friday Women's Group in Sydney and the cooking and swimming classes in Melbourne. We will also be working towards more lobby trips to Canberra and we will continue to mark and celebrate International Refugee Day and to use this auspicious date to keep the conflict in Darfur on the media's agenda."

*Excerpt taken from the Far to Here website. To view photos from the exhibition and learn more go to: www.fartohere.com