

# CAPITAL COMMENTARY

June 13, 2005

## Listening to the Sudanese Church in Exile

This month a team and I traveled to Africa to visit with persecuted Sudanese Christians in Kakuma—the United Nations (UN) refugee camp in remote northern Kenya that shelters nearly 100,000 displaced Africans from war-torn countries. We listened, taught, encouraged, and were amazed by the perseverance of the Sudanese and by their examples of faith under fire.

The Sudanese have suffered much. Sudan's 22-year genocidal civil war between the Arab and Islamic north and the African, Christian and animist south has killed more than two million people and created more than four million refugees (not counting the current genocide in Darfur). Everyone I spoke with had lost family members and friends. They had harrowing stories of survival. Many told how government militias bombed their villages and led violent campaigns of rape and murder against civilians. One particularly devious tactic used by the government in Khartoum was to kidnap young African boys and force them into the Islamic army to fight against their own people in the south. Southern Sudanese either had to kill their own children or be killed by them. In either case, the government's policy of ethnic cleansing advanced.

Yet, it is striking just how *normal* life in Kakuma refugee camp is. Food distribution occurs twice per month, thanks to the UN's World Food Program. Children play and laugh with broad smiles, surprised to see white visitors from afar. Refugees from Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, and the Congo live in separate zones in the camp. They marry, go to school, worship their gods, raise up children, and run businesses (including a tent in the Somali section offering high-speed internet access). They dream of going home.

Faith and religion are woven into the patterns of daily life for the refugees. We were awakened each morning well before dawn by loudspeakers echoing out the Muslim call to prayer. On Sunday we joined Christians of the Dinka tribe singing and dancing at a Holy Communion service outside under the hot African sun. We met two esteemed women elders whose

ministry has helped fuel the explosive growth of Christianity among the Dinka in the Bor region. Refugees shared how their faith has kept them from committing suicide in moments when they were tempted to despair. Non-governmental organizations such as Lutheran World Federation, Jesuit Relief Services, and Kenya's National Council of Churches assist in most details of the camp's operations.

Refugee faith can also have a sharp political edge to it. Displaced people have suffered the grave injustice of having their own governments turn on them in violence. Refugees have seen governments do unspeakable evils and they yearn deeply for peace, security, and stable societies. During a community discussion I led on justice as a biblical idea, members of the Dinka tribe reflected on the meaning of their suffering and shared their hopes and dreams for a new Sudan. They said that in their time of greatest need they often felt abandoned and forgotten by the nations of the world. One elderly Sudanese church leader told us she could never understand how America could ignore the suffering, disease and poverty of her people, because she has heard that America has many Christians and the resources to travel to the moon.

In his song "Crumbs from Your Table," Africa activist and rock star Bono of U2 sings, "Where you live should not decide whether you live or whether you die." I left Africa deeply convicted of that truth. Leaders thanked us for coming and said our presence gave them hope. They asked us to thank the church in America for speaking out on their behalf and for challenging the Bush Administration and the international community to hold Sudan's leaders accountable. America has been given much. To those whom much is given, from them will much be expected.

—Stephen Lazarus  
*Senior Policy Associate*

### The Center for Public Justice

P.O. Box 48368 \* Washington, DC 20002 \* 410-571-6300 \* Fax 410-571-6365 \* [www.cpjustice.org](http://www.cpjustice.org) \*  
[capcomm@cpjustice.org](mailto:capcomm@cpjustice.org)

The Mission of the Center is to Equip Citizens, Develop Leaders, and Shape Policy in pursuit of its Purpose to Serve God, Advance Justice, and Transform Public Life. The *Capital Commentary* may be photocopied/retransmitted in its entirety but not otherwise without permission. The commentaries do not necessarily represent an official position of the Center's but are intended to help advance discussion in the field.

Copyright Center for Public Justice 2005