

Sudan: Suffering for Christ in A Land of Slavery

For years Christians in the south have been starved, bombed and sold into slavery in an attempt to impose Islamic rule. But church still lives.

Kamerino hadn't eaten in many days, but his hunger pangs had passed. He was only 10 years old, but he was old enough to know that he was starving to death.

The small boy asked his grandmother for permission to join three of his friends in searching for food. He knew the danger, but what choice did he have? He had already been orphaned after the Islamic raiders murdered his parents. A hunger to survive drove the fragile boy.

Reluctantly, his grandmother permitted him to go—with the understanding that the four boys would return home that day. The children left the village the next morning. But instead of finding food, they were found by radical Islamic soldiers.

An officer leading the soldiers spotted the boys and yelled for them to come forward. Kamerino and his friends had heard the grim stories of Muslim soldiers taking boys captive to be indoctrinated in Islam, and capturing and raping young girls. Fearing for their lives, the boys ran. The closest hiding place was a field of tall grass, and they burrowed into it, hoping the soldiers would forget them.

But the soldiers wouldn't give up. They circled the field that was the boys' hiding place and lit it on fire. Surrounded by flames, the children had little choice. They fled the fire and ran right into the arms of the Islamic soldiers. Kamerino, however, stayed put, even as the fire began to consume his flesh.

When the field was completely burned, the soldiers looked for the fourth boy they'd seen. They found his body, lying motionless amid the smoking ash, scorched from head to toe. Assuming Kamerino was dead, the soldiers left, marching their three new captives with them.

In the last 18 years, Sudan's civil war has claimed the lives of at least 2 million people. Villages in southern Sudan are frequently attacked, and captives are sold into slavery in the Muslim north. The conflict is, at least in part, over land. Southern Sudan is the only part of the country outside of the desertlocked north that the government can use to grow crops.

But more than land, the war is about religion. The Muslim government in the north gives the mostly Christian and animist Sudanese in the south three choices: convert to Islam, face threats and danger, or leave. Many simply don't have the resources to leave but refuse to bow to Muhammad.

Last year, a team from the Voice of the Martyrs (VOM), a ministry that champions the cause of the persecuted church, set out for the Sudanese village of Pageri, where they were to distribute 2,000 blankets given to VOM for their "Blankets of Love" campaign. The village had not received any previous assistance from the many humanitarian organizations working in southern Sudan. Because of a wide river that often flooded near the village, trucks rarely ventured along the almost

impassable road.

After a prayer for divine protection, the VOM team set off for Pageri, carrying the blankets, supplies and a projector to show the Jesus film. Shortly into the trip, a flat tire stopped them. They returned to their camp, opting to continue their journey the next day. That evening, planes from the government of Sudan dropped 24 bombs in and around Pageri.

The following day, VOM's team loaded up another truck and set off again. This time they arrived safely in Pageri, and distributed some of the aid they had brought, then went further on to a village called Kit, where they screened the Jesus film for hundreds of Sudanese. The next morning they started back for base camp.

Just a few miles down the road, the team came to a small military camp, housing families of rebel soldiers from southern Sudan. They distributed the blankets to the wives and children in the camp, then sat down to talk with some of the camp's officers.

Quietly, a Sudanese woman approached a team member and tapped him on the shoulder. "Please come quickly," she said. "Please come to see this little boy. He has skin problems."

Not sure what to expect, the team followed the woman into a small cement structure. There were no lights and no windows in the room, so the team leader grabbed a flashlight and began to look around.

The light caught the eyes of a small boy looking up at the light-skinned visitors. He lay on a small piece of green

plastic, his body covered by a tattered blanket.

When the team lifted the blanket to examine the boy's wounds, hundreds of flies swarmed off his body. His skin hung in blistered patches. A purple dye stained his skin where villagers had tried in vain to treat the terrible burns. The team had met Kamerino.

When Kamerino had not returned to his grandmother's home, she asked some villagers to look for him, praying that he was safe. They found him. Somehow, he had pushed himself to his feet and was staggering toward home. His feet were badly burned, barely able to carry the weight of his wounded body.

His chest also was burned. He was brought back to the village and placed in the concrete hut. Villagers tried what they could, but there was little hope. There was no way to transport the boy nearly 50 miles to the nearest hospital. For eight days Kamerino hung tenaciously onto life before the VOM team found him.

The team quickly made room in their truck, then lifted the green plastic on which Kamerino's tattered body lay into the bed of their truck. The 50 miles to the hospital seemed an eternity. The boy was too frightened to speak, but with each bump on the road he cried out in pain.

After what seemed like hours later, the team delivered him into the care of doctors at the hospital that VOM sponsors in southern Sudan. Today, his body and spirit are mending, but he will always bear the scars of Islamic hatred.

Kamerino is part of an entire generation of Sudanese children

who have never known peace in their homeland. The civil war that divides their country is now almost two decades old. Related to that war have been famine and persecution as the Islamic government tries to starve and harass the Christian and animist peoples of southern Sudan into accepting Islam.

The government carefully controls the areas to which the United Nations and humanitarian groups are permitted to deliver food, thus fostering famine and forced starvation. Many southern Sudanese have been abducted and sold into slavery in the north. Women have been gang raped, children tortured and whole villages massacred.

And yet the church in Sudan is experiencing growth. Sudanese believers refuse to deny their faith, and they profess Christ as their only hope. Still, another famine threatens this harvest. There is a desperate need for trained leaders, Bibles are in short supply, and the education system is virtually paralyzed.

As with most wars, the biggest victims are the children, and the greatest catastrophe is the loss of potential—for the country and for Christ's kingdom.

Addil and many of his friends in the village of Kauda walk an hour each day to attend classes at Holy Cross School. They work their way up and down the pebble-laden pathway with little difficulty. The soles of their shoeless feet are like leather, as walking long distances through the Nuba Mountains is a way of life.

It was a hot, balmy Tuesday morning last year when terror fell from the sky, striking Addil and his classmates as they sat in

the shade beneath a tree in the schoolyard. Their teacher had moved the English class outdoors so the children could enjoy the cool February breeze. Most of the students were 10 or 11 years old.

The children were writing their English lesson when the engines of an Antonov cargo plane were heard overhead. On this day, four bombs were intentionally dropped on the students below. All but one exploded, projecting hot shrapnel in every direction, tearing into the flesh of the students and ripping through Addil's left arm.

Twenty-two people—including a Holy Cross teacher and several students—eventually perished from the government's attack. Young Addil's mangled left arm and hand were amputated. Today the Holy Cross headmaster says Addil, not yet a teen, has changed. The boy is more introverted and subdued since his injury.

Kamerino and Addil are two of the millions of believers scarred by the war. Kuwa Bashir was a youth pastor in the Blue Nile region when he was captured by Islamic soldiers. He was beaten for seven days and then released and told to stop his church activities. He refused and was again taken captive by the Muslim soldiers.

When the officer urged him to convert to Islam and threatened his life, Bashir testified about Jesus to the gathered soldiers. "If I die or am shot dead, I will be very happy because I will leave an example for other Christians to follow in my steps," he told them. "I will die without fear, like Jesus on the cross."

The officer decided not to kill Bashir, but instead poured acid on his hands, leaving him with a mass of useless burned flesh that daily reminds him of his decision to refuse Allah. Other captured believers saw the torture and wept because they could not help their brother. For 13 years he has borne the scars of abuse. His wife has to feed him because he cannot use his hands.

Kuwa, Addil and Kamerino are just a few of the millions affected by persecution in Sudan. The shocking statistics include men, women, boys and girls living out their faith each day in a hostile land. Let not the Western church, in her comfort and ease, forget these battered and persecuted members of Christ's body.

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