

‘The Janjaweed come and kill all the men and boys. They rape the women and take some as slaves, burn the villages and the crops they can’t steal. Who will stand up to the Janjaweed, the most feared and sadistically ruthless thugs on a continent glutted with horror?’



A A GILL
AUTHORS IN THE
FRONT LINE

In the first of our series of stirring reports from around the world, A A Gill witnesses the plight of the refugees fleeing genocide in Sudan. Photographs by Tom Craig

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here are rumours of war, of genocide, of ethnic cleansing; they are whispered on the gritty, boiling wind that blows across the border from Sudan. In ones and twos and tens and hundreds, refugees struggle into Chad with stories of systematic murder, rape, slavery and scorched earth. I've been down this mine-sown track before: five years ago I covered the man-made famine that was an attrition against the Dinka in the south. That 20-year conflict has finally been settled with a peace deal brokered by the Americans and paid for by oil; now the murderous bullying has moved up into the large western province of Darfur, where the irregular bandit cavalry, the Janjaweed, are wiping out black farming communities. The Arab-Islamic government of Khartoum denies any culpability and says with a shrug that this is a little local conflict between farmers and nomadic herdsman.

Meanwhile, the UN steeple its fingers, sucks its teeth and equivocates, hinting that perhaps maybe this might be the worst humanitarian crisis in the world at the moment. Maybe perhaps 100,000 people are dead, and perhaps maybe a million more are on the pending list, waiting to get across the border before the rains come.

Our own UN security council and the G8 have decided they don't have any immediate plans to intervene in Darfur, so the voiceless and unheeded continue to stagger through the desert into Chad, a diplomatically dumb country spectacularly unprepared for guests. The accusations of ethnic cleansing and genocide hang in the air, but few with the power to do anything about them want to say the words on record. It's like casting a spell to summon the apocalypse. Once said out loud, the world is a step closer to having to confront another Rwanda, another Kosovo. But there is a selective deafness abroad brought about by conflict in the Middle East, Iraq and the constant sirens of global terrorism, and unstated but ever present is the real-world wisdom that this, after all, is just another Africa story from the continent that brought you all the defining examples of horror; where the usual calibrations of misery don't apply.

I have no doubt there are dozens of marvellous and edifying things about Chad: being here is not one of them. Chad, or Tchad as they call it locally, as if named by some passing Yorkshireman, is really no more than a cartographer's patch.

40 The French left it here as somewhere to keep the

'A woman has given birth to twin boys. She gently flicks the flies away, but she won't feed them. She can't kill her babies, as women do out here, but she can't help them into her world either'



bottom of the Sahara in, and for those platoons of foreign-legionnaires who had the most to forget. It's about the size of Germany, with a population of just 9m. I remember it from my school atlas – it had the lowest per-capita income in the world. It isn't quite the poorest country on Earth any more, but it is way, way down there: 80% of the population live below the poverty line, 80% work the sand. Its primary exports are a handkerchief of cotton, a few cattle and a near-monopoly of the

world's gum arabic needs. Gum arabic is essential in the manufacture of good-quality watercolours. Not a lot of people know that; in fact not a lot of people know anything about landlocked Chad. It has no airline, no railways; it has 33,400 kilometres of road, but only 267 kilometres of them are tarmacked. Life expectancy is 48 years, and only if you don't expect much. It does, though, have a glut of human diversity: 200 ethnic groups. In the north, the Goran Zaghawa, Kanembou, Ouaddai, Baguirmi, Hadjerai, Fulbe, Kotoko, Hausa, Boulala

and Maba; all Arab and Muslim. In the south are the Moundang, Moussei and Massa, who are for the most part Christian, which in Africa always comes hyphenated with animist, and they're black. They are the blackest black, blue-black, matt-black black you've ever seen.

Chad, along with Sudan, is hung across one of the least reported, potentially most volatile cultural fault lines in the world: the border between black and Arab Africa. Before the Europeans ever arrived there was a history of exploitation, slavery >>>



Above: at the hospital in Iriba, a desolate young mother refuses to breast-feed her baby twins. Right: people are ferried by truck, for a fee, to the refugee camp at Iridimi

Right: the small market town of Tine, which straddles the border between Chad and Sudan. The Sudanese side is deserted, having been ravaged by the Janjaweed



Not a soul, not a donkey exists on the Sudanese side. It's a town that has suffered a stroke: one half paralysed, the other bereft and staggering

and massacre. Here, the appellation Muslim or Christian comes with baggage and chains. Chad isn't one of those failed states we hear so much about from smug, overachieving nations: rather it's a stalled state, one that never really made it off the starting blocks of independence. It goes through the stately motions, and boasts plenty of initials after its name from international organisations.

It has ambassadors and a billion dollars of debt, it signs international treaties (though I notice it hasn't ratified the international law of the sea yet), but it isn't defined by the niceties of statesmanship. Like Sudan, Chad is a slave to the land on which it precariously squats, earth blasted and dominated by the sun. This is the hottest place I've ever been. Temperatures are regularly in the fifties; they have climbed the thirties before sunrise. This isn't just weather, something mundane to be endured: it's a godlike thing, a shimmering, psychotic, physical presence. It's like living with a bright murderer. Achievement is not measured here, as it is in the damp, green First World, by invention and energy, but by the ability to do as little as possible, for as long as possible, in as much shade as possible.

Chad has three pressing problems. It has the black curse of Africa: unexploited oil. It has the same flag as Romania, and it has between 100,000

and 200,000 refugees. It has gone to the UN to protest about the flag business. To get about, you either hitch a lift on a lorry, hire a four-wheel-drive and stutter across the desert, or beg a seat on one of the small humanitarian flights that sustain a skeletal relief effort. After a couple of days hanging out in the two-storey breeze-block and barbed-wire boredom of Ndjamena, we managed to get a flight into the east. At the airport the top-secret French Mirage fighters screamed secretly into the shimmering morning air to spy on North Africa. The French can never actually leave their old colonies. They hang around like gun-toting divorced husbands. We fly to Abéché, which puts up with another French base; legionnaires lounging in the shadow of their Jeeps, sporting nut-hugging camouflage shorts and coquettish little berets. For all their surly élan, they always look like the backing group for the Village People.

We drive on to Iriba, a town made of mud that rises out of the desert like geometric worm casts. The deafening silence is broken only by the morning throb of the baker's generator and the occasional call of a lovesick donkey. There is nothing to see here, nothing to play at, nothing to talk about, nothing to do, except squat in the shade and throw stones at meagre chickens. You can't help but wonder at the terrifying boredom threshold you'd need to call this place home.

Iriba has the only hospital for the thousands of refugees stretched across hundreds of miles of border. It's a brick building of three or four little wards and a room that makes do as an operating theatre. In the compound are some sagging, dusty tents for the therapeutic feeding of malnourished

children, and there is some shade for their mothers and those who have no bed. The hospital is run by Médecins Sans Frontières – Chad has few doctors, and they all work in the capital or for the UN.

There is only one doctor-surgeon, a Belgian girl who looks like she has stepped from a Frans Hals painting; bosomy and blonde, she's like a ghost among her black patients. She dreams Belgium dreams, of dairy products, yoghurt, cheese, fountains of milk. She makes her rounds with professional cheerfulness. The sick regard her with that stoic fatalism that is the small dignity of African hospitals. Just having made it here is staggering good fortune.

She stops at the bed of a woman who has given birth to tiny twin boys. They lie like little plucked birds, their bodies flickering with breath. Their mother arranges her shawl to give them shade, gently flicks away the flies – but she won't feed them. She is lactating but she won't feed them. And the hospital won't give them powdered milk because they can't guarantee its supply for the whole of their infancy. It's a standoff. The mother won't or can't say why, one remorseless hour at a time, she can starve her sons to death. She lies apart with an impassive, locked-away beauty, like an odalisque, watching her boys eke out their tiny reserves of existence. The doctor is frustrated. The mother stares, speechlessly daring judgment. The universal blessing of children is for the refugee a curse. How could a lonely girl without a husband or family welcome another pair of mouths, two widow's mites, into this stark, hopeless life? I can only guess at the monstrous ill fortune and misery that led her to this hopeless impasse. She ➤➤➤

can't kill her babies, as women sometimes do out here *in extremis*, but she can't help them into her world either, so she lies here silently jammed between the intolerable and the unbearable.

Outside, a 13-year-old boy takes painful little steps, helped by an orderly. His brother stepped on the mine that killed him and took this boy's foot, and doctors had to remove one of his testicles. A group of men sitting in the shade give him a little clap. They may be guerrillas: they have bullet and shrapnel wounds; one is paralysed. Nobody asks.

I stand in on an operation in the little theatre. It's hardly sterile. There are sheets over the windows to keep out the desert, but it becomes stifling. Flies hopscotch over the 16-year-old girl lying on the table. She has been hit by a truck. They use ketamine as an anaesthetic. In the west it is only used as a veterinary drug; here it's a godsend. But while the bone-deep lacerations in the leg are being disinfected, the girl comes round. Her eyes roll with terror, hands jerk, a soft mewling grows to wails, then screams. The nurse reaches for another hypodermic cosh. "I think she'll probably lose this leg," says the doctor.

In the therapeutic feeding centre, children are given high-protein porridge; mothers and grandmothers finger-feed tiny mouthfuls into slowly ruminating mouths. These children, with their stretched-parchment faces, sparse hair and huge, sorrowful eyes, are always shocking, and I am aware of the irony of how ancient, wise and calm starving children always look. A woman rocks a spindly, floppy toddler. He is dying, she says. And closes his eyes. "No," explains a nurse through an interpreter. "He's very dehydrated. He will die if they don't get fluids into him." She adds that the mother shouldn't have taken out the saline drip they put into his arm. She tries to fit another, but the mother pushes it away; no, she insists, her child is dead. The nurses, though compassionate in a matter-of-fact way, get grittily frustrated at the lack of understanding in these mothers. Medicine is so second-nature to us, yet so mythical to them.

There is a little albino lad about two years old who is everyone's favourite. They call him Petit Blanc. He is responding well to the therapeutic feeding, the wrinkled skin filling out and dimpling. "He won't last long," she says. "They never do, albinos. Skin cancer." Does his mother know? "She does now. I told her." Can't she do anything? The doctor shrugs: "Keep him out of the sun." But all this woman has between her and the blistering, baby-murderous sky is a thin veil. "You see, already he has the melanomas."

About an hour away from the hospital, past dead tanks, relics of a defunct civil war, is the desert refugee camp of Iridimi. Built for 6,000, it sags under the needs of 14,000 souls who live beneath plastic sheets and rags stretched over thorn trees. Each day brings more lorries laden with Sudanese blacks and their bright bundles of belongings. They trundle in from the border, herding skeletal donkeys and matted goats, moving further inland as the Sudanese Arab militia cross the border to rob the last vestiges of property and livestock. The gunships that make up the Sudanese air force drop



There is a little albino lad who is responding well to the feeding, but he won't last long. 'They never do, albinos,' says the doctor. 'Skin cancer'

handmade bombs on border towns. The war in Dafur is being pursued by the last irregular cavalry still plying their trade: the Janjaweed. On horses and camels, they surround black villages. They are supported by regular army troops. The Sudanese government denies involvement, claiming they are local gangs. The Janjaweed live by looting cattle, grain, small amounts of cash and slaves.

The government's reason for not intervening is clear: it's ethnic cleansing and genocide. There is meant to be a UN-monitored ceasefire, but the casualties, terrified women and starving children still stream across the border. The refugees' stories have a metronomic repetition: their villages are shelled or bombed, the Janjaweed surround them and kill all the men and boys old enough to be remotely threatening. They systematically rape the women, taking some as slaves; they then burn the villages and the crops they can't steal, and ride off the livestock. And still the government claims the Janjaweed have nothing to do with them.

Khartoum offers access to the international community to check these calumnies, these accusations. Anyone can come to see that really Sudan is lovely – a hot Switzerland with mosques – but invariably the promised visas for observers and NGOs never materialise. If they do manage to get one, access to the worst areas is limited. There are 500 applications from humanitarian agencies alone gathering diplomatic dust. This pattern of denial and opaque promises of transparency is familiar after 20 years of war in the south. Who is going to do anything about it? Who will stand up to the Janjaweed? They are among the most feared,

sadistically ruthless, irregular thugs in a continent glutted with military horror. The refugees joke about them with terrified black humour; they all wear leather necklaces of little bound spells that are meant to protect them from bullets or knives, landmines and violent death. Little dark-age incantations against the ordinance of modern war.

Anyone who doubts that this conflict is either genocidal or ethnically motivated only has to visit these camps. All the refugees are black; there are no Arabs here. And even more shocking, 90% of them are women and children. The children up to the age of five are about 50-50 girls and boys, as you'd expect. From 5 to 15 they are 70% girls. Some of the men would have stayed to fight or hide with their livestock but, as Sherlock Holmes used to say, "when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains... must be the truth". It is impossible to imagine any other explanation for this disappeared generation of men than systematic murder. The women tell of deaths, terrified flight, lost children, missing husbands. "We will never go back" says one. "Unless the UN have soldiers, and only if they are white soldiers," adds another.

The refugees are related linguistically and tribally to the Chadians on this side of the border; they have moved and traded together for hundreds of years, and are now welcomed. It is humbling to see with what good grace the people with the least offer shelter and succour to those with nothing. The majority of refugees are not in the rich First World, but in the poorest bits of the Third World, where they and their hosts grow poorer.

The greatest problem after safety is water. From sunrise to sunset in the camp, a long line of women wait under the deathly sun to fill containers from a couple of standpipes that are fed by large plastic bladders, which in turn are filled by lorries. I have to drink at least six litres of soupy water a day to stop my tongue cracking and my throat closing up. But I never see these women drink. Their bright cotton shawls flap in the wind, revealing a little arm or resting head tied to a back. In the white light, the rivers of cloth look like spinnakers of saturated colour, printed with the repeated pictures of other people's good fortune. You see Mercedes badges and BMW signs, footballs, mobile phones, aeroplanes, the faces of politicians who've promised prosperity, cities of skyscrapers – the ragged incantations for an unavailable life, and the shaming irony of a desperate African version of designer labels. Here is a picture of a house you would be happy in, a diploma you could get if there was a school, a car, a comfy chair. Impossible, ridiculous cotton dreams of a fantasy luxury.

A mile or so outside the camp, in a stand of knotted acacias, is an ancient stone-lined well, one of the Sahara's fabled oases. It doesn't look like the painting. A dirty, shit-strewn muddy quag, where herdsmen sweat and slither at the heavy job of tending their xylophone-ribbed flocks. They perch precariously on the edge of the well; the thick water at the bottom is only a few feet deep. In the bed of the wadi there is a stinking half-burnt pyre of donkey and goat corpses. The desert is littered with animal cadavers; elsewhere, ➤➤➤➤

CHAD AND SUDAN: continued

parched livestock stand in little bits of filigreed shade and wait to die. The sun desiccates their bodies to tough bags, leather and bones that grin at the sky. For some reason there are no carrion eaters, no vultures, so the dead lie around like old teabags. When the rains do come, they'll become slimy and get washed into the wells and wadis, and leach into the water table. The risk of a cholera epidemic is just one runny, squatting child away.

The desert and the water won't support the Chadians and the Sudanese refugees, and there are signs that the welcome is growing thin. Charities drilling in search of new wells for permanent camps have been angrily stopped by farmers.

We drive on a spine-fusing, hip-dislocating, brain-poaching journey to Tine, a market town that crosses the border. It sits on one of the skeletal lines of trade and communication that bleach into the Sahara. The route down from Libya meets a crossroads from Sudan into Central Africa here. The border itself is no more than a dry wadi and some trees, under which sit a squad of Chadian soldiers. There are a couple of impressive mosques and a large covered market. Prices are astronomic for the bits and boxes of white goods that made the Homeric saga through the desert to end up here.

Across the dry river and the shade trees you see the other half of town, the Sudanese half, a mirror image of mud brick and minaret, utterly deserted, where not a soul, not a donkey exists. It's a town that's suffered a stroke: one half paralysed, the

other bereft and staggering. The Janjaweed came, murdered and expelled the left-hand population. People ask, how could the Sudanese do this to their own people? I've heard Sudanese spokesmen with honey voices rhetorically ask the same thing. "Why would we do these things to our own people?" The answer would seem to be that the Arab-Muslim regime in Khartoum doesn't consider the black inhabitants of their southern and eastern regions as their people, their kin, at all.

With its rigid, prescriptive interpretation of sharia, Khartoum attempted to develop chemical and nuclear weapons. It was Khartoum that sheltered Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda while they planned the embassy bombing in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. Khartoum pursued a civil war in the south for 20 years, engineering famine as a weapon of mass murder. And it still accepts the oldest, most inhuman of mass crimes: slavery. Blacks are captured, kept, bred and ransomed as slaves. This is a blatantly racist, genocidal regime. The UN has called the catastrophe in Darfur the worst humanitarian disaster in the world, but that's a euphemism. It describes a consequence, not the cause. This is a calculated crime. The greatest inhumanitarian disaster in the world.

In another refugee camp, at Touloum, a boy, perhaps 20, approaches me. He is wearing a once-smart sports jacket and trousers and – a rare thing – spectacles. "You speak English?" he asks. "I was a student of English in Darfur at the university. I was

in my second year." He looks round the ragged shelters. "This is a bad place, very bad. We need two things: water and an English department."

I think he means it as a joke; it's a bleakly funny line. But he is absolutely serious. He is close to tears and I understand what a struggle it must have been to get to university at all, what a monumental investment, not just for him but his family, his village, this slightly bookish boy in his western charity clothes and wise glasses, already approaching statistical middle age, cast out as homeless, begging flotsam among a diaspora of grieving women. It is such a pitiful waste. A damnable squandering of this heroic spark.

On the long, dry road home, I stop off at the hospital in Iriba. The woman who'd pronounced her son dead has had her prophecy fulfilled. The war-wounded men come and bury the little bundle in the graveyard behind the latrines. She sits hunched, facing the wall. She doesn't cry. I haven't seen one of these women cry. Inside, the mother has begun feeding her twin boys, her reasons for offering them life as secretly implacable as had been her decision to withhold it ■

Médecins Sans Frontières is an international medical-aid agency with a reputation for being the first to arrive in a crisis-hit area. The movement was awarded the 1999 Nobel peace prize. To donate to MSF, call 0800 200 222 or visit www.uk.msf.org



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