VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
by Jacquellena Carrero

I remember one woman asking me if there was anywhere she could go and feel safe. I didn’t know what to answer because I don’t think there is an answer. These words were uttered by an aid worker in Abeche and were published in the 2009 Amnesty International Report on Violence Against Women in Eastern Chad. Sudan’s Darfur region has been the site of widespread human rights violations such as rape and killings. However, the 142,000 women and girls that fled to Chad cannot escape their nightmare: the human rights horrors that plagued them in Darfur continue to haunt them in Chad. Refugee women and girls face a serious risk of rape and other violence, especially if they leave the security of refugee camps.

The eastern region of Chad is home to many refugees from Darfur, displaced Chadians, the local population, individuals working with humanitarian agencies and many human rights groups. The United Nations has also deployed a significant number of troops in the region, called MINURCAT, to protect civilians and promote the rule of law. However, insecurity still reigns in the region. One of the principal causes of the insecurity and human rights violations is refugee spillover from Darfur. Eastern Chad shares a long border with Darfur. The notorious Janjaweed militia carried out cross border raids in which thousands of Chadian residents were killed.

The instability in the region has a particularly strong effect on refugee women and girls as they continue to be raped and attacked when they venture outside refugee camps for simple necessities such as water, firewood or food.

These acts of violence are carried out by organized groups, bandits and even sometimes by members of the Chadian National Army. However, refugee camps are not always safer. Amnesty International has documented cases of women being raped inside the refugee camps by camp personnel. The Amnesty International Report on Violence Against Women in Eastern Chad includes the story of a woman named Mariam who was raped in the Gaga Refugee Camp by a man working with an international organization in the camp. The international NGO reportedly fired Mariam’s rapist, but no further legal action was taken against him despite a complaint filed with the security branch of the National Commission for Reception and Settlement of Refugees.

However, camp personnel don’t always have to be involved in the actual rape or violence itself to be part of the problem. When incidents occur outside the camps, camp authorities frequently do not take action against the perpetrators. The Amnesty International Report on Violence Against Women in Eastern Chad includes the story of a woman named Fatima who had left Bredjing Camp to collect firewood. A man accosted her, accused her of taking their wood, and beat her leaving her bleeding on the ground. Fatima insists she was not raped, but would not speak in the presence of her family and did not provide any more information on her incident. No action was taken to find the man who beat her.

Perpetrators of rape and other forms of violence against refugee women are seldom brought to justice. The culture of impunity is deeply entrenched in eastern Chad and must be challenged. Amnesty International now recommends that Chadian authorities abide by and implement forcefully the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and 1820 to promote women’s safety, end violence against women, and ensure women’s participation in politics and peace-building. As student activists, we too must recognize this problem and act to end the crisis.

Two documentary films, many heartwrenching tales

College students from Africa come to campus and share their refugee stories with the Columbia community
by Daniel Valello

Columbia students had the opportunity Nov. 15 and 16 to see two documentary films—The Lost Boys: An American Story of the Refugee Experience and The Rescue: The Story of Joseph Kony’s Child Soldiers—and to hear college students from Africa talk about their experiences in the United States and back home.

Columbia University Amnesty International (CUAI), alongside student group Liberty in North Korea, sponsored the Lost Boys screening in a cozy Pupin classroom filled with viewers and listeners eager to learn about the life of Peter Dut and his friends. Peter, who attended the on-campus event in person, was orphaned as a young boy amid civil war in Sudan. Surviving lion attacks and militia gunfire, Peter reached a refugee camp in Kenya along with thousands of other children (known now as “the Lost Boys”) before being chosen by the U.S. government’s Refugee Program to come to America. Life in the U.S. proved quite challenging at first for the Lost Boys, who started with little support...
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from friends or family and encountered an array of confusing legal and logistical structures. Now a student at Green Mountain College in Vermont, Peter took twenty minutes after the screening to share his inspiring life story with those in attendance.

The second documentary, Invisible Children’s The Rescue, discusses the horrible events that have taken place since a rebel group called the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) began terrorizing Northern Uganda—causing massive displacement, abducting thousands of children, and forcing them to become child soldiers—in 1987. CUAI, UNICEF, GlobeMed, the Columbia Child Rights Group, InterVarsity Social Justice, the African Students Association, and the Global Initiative for Social Change through the Arts joined together to cosponsor the film’s screening and an ensuing presentation from Invisible Children in Lerner Party Space.

Akello Brenda, who began working with Invisible Children several years ago and has just completed her studies at Makerere University in Kampala, spoke along with her mentor, Lanyero Benna, about the dreadful reality of child soldiering in central Africa today. Both women also encouraged their audience to take action. Donations and profits from merchandise sales went (and continue to go) toward the building of radio alert systems in the Northeast Congo, where the LRA is currently attacking.

Albeit in two rather different styles, both the Lost Boys event and the Rescue presentation stayed true to CUAI’s major theme for the semester, “refugees,” and left all those in attendance with greater knowledge of—if not an increasing interest in—the experiences of displaced people.

**Lost at Sea:** The eternal question of the limits of human ingenuity

Maybe it’s a reflection of the chronic optimism—and apparently blind confidence—associated to my age and generation, but there was something slightly off about Nov. 22’s speaker panel “Lost at Sea: Environmental Refugees from a Scientific and Legal Perspective.” One cannot fault the panelists for their opinions, and far be it from me to discount the very real scenarios outlined by all of them.

However, I suppose it was the way in which each of the panelists saw their findings and future projections that seemed strangely defeatist and dystopian. As I’m sure many people did, I sat engrossed as Alex de Sherbinin talked about the Bellagio Conference and its recommendations to create better legal and structural frameworks to organize and implement resettlement plans in the (likely) event of future natural disasters and permanent changes, such as rising sea levels. He talked about the need to have baseline assessments on environmental, health, and social impacts of climate change; about the need to involve affected populations in assessment in planning.

Michael Oppenheimer talked about the need for quantitative studies of the estimated 700 million environmental migrants, for a change in discourse around migration. And Michael Gerrard elaborated on the open field of legal issues around climate change, as per his time spent in the Marshall Islands.

How will sovereignty become destabilized in the age of disappearing nations? How will citizens of an extinct territory seek legal redress for the environmental processes that precipitated the demise of their home?

For me, all of these questions bred a wealth of ideas, and an intense desire to ask my own peers and contemporaries how we (and, as we must acknowledge, it will be us) will work through these issues and define the terms of a world in transition. Because, of course, the world is in transition, in so many ways that we cannot pretend are disconnected: economically, socially, and physically.

Each of the panelists’ accounts of their work made this abundantly clear. But what also seemed clear was a difference of opinion in how to balance change and continuity.

While the men speaking to us seemed generally pessimistic and at points shocked that any of us in the audience might dare downplay the enduring power of the political status quo, as I spoke to friends at the end I...
**SPOTLIGHT**  
Alex Friedman, BC ’13  
compiled by Jenna Lauter and Kyle Robertson

**What made you interested in joining Amnesty International at Columbia?**

In high school, I did service hours at an underserved middle school near my house. I painted murals in the school and tutored students in Math and History. I went into the experience thinking that I was just going to help out, but even though I was technically the tutor, I was really the student. When one of my students did not come to his tutoring session, I was asked to call his house. Although no one picked up, I was later informed that his brother had been shot by a local gang member the day before. From this experience, I realized how much hardship people face on a day-to-day basis—even people who lived a few miles from my house. From this experience, I developed an interest in social change that I transferred over to my work as a volunteer for the Obama campaign. I spent most of my time making calls to local voters and going door to door to encourage both democratic and swing voters to make it out to the polling stations on election day. In trying to convince others that Obama was the right man to be President, I learned more about my own beliefs and interest in change. When I got to college, I felt that I had to channel my interest in social justice in some fashion, so I went to an Amnesty meeting. It’s been such an incredible outlet for me!

**The focus of the Columbia chapter of Amnesty this semester has been on refugees. As a first semester member, how do you feel you have been able to affect the issues at hand?**

Even in my first semester, I’ve had many opportunities to be involved in the organization. I recently joined the publicity committee, through which I’ve been able to help advertise for some of our events such as our panel discussion, “Lost at Sea: Environmental Refugees from a Scientific and Legal Perspective.” That was a fascinating discussion of the issues we will soon face regarding displaced persons due to climate change. I’ve gotten to really get the message out and raise awareness through designing and distributing flyers. I also recently had the opportunity to lobby in the New Jersey senate offices for the Refugee Protection Act of 2010. Along with a small team of three other Amnesty members (Junia Chaudhry, Phoebe Lytle, and Jenna Lauter), we were able to meet with the senior advisor to Senator Menéndez and the immigration projects specialist for Senator Lautenberg, to discuss some important points that the act would address, and hopefully enlist their support in getting it passed.

**How did it feel getting to interact directly with the US government?**

It was an amazing feeling! For one thing, lobbying was a great opportunity and incentive to really familiarize myself with the Refugee Protection Act. It’s an important piece of legislation that addresses many critical issues existing within the current system. If it gets passed, it will drastically improve the quality of life for asylum seekers in the U.S. and will really help to both streamline the system, and make it more in tune with the human rights principles that our country stands for.

Getting to speak directly to our representatives about something important to me, and being told that they would pass the word on to Washington, made me really feel like I was doing my job as an active citizen. I felt like I was really making a difference.

**What advice would you give students who want to get involved in human rights issues but just aren’t sure how?**

I would tell them to definitely just put themselves out there! Joining organizations like Amnesty is a great way to get in touch with the issues, and with peers who care about them. Through that, it is very easy to find ways to start getting involved in raising awareness and making change. They shouldn’t be intimidated at all to join—every club wants members. You can definitely get involved right away, too. As you can see, I’m extremely new to Amnesty and I’ve already had such great experiences. It’s amazing how many opportunities there are to actively make a difference. Just go to the meetings—that’s the first step!
THEN & NOW: Hurricane Katrina

by Nicole Estevez and Chris Torsitano

THEN

On Aug. 29, 2005, at 7 a.m., Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, affecting places such as Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and Alabama in what would become the worst natural disaster in our nation’s history.

Less than a month later, Hurricane Rita arrived and only made the situation worse. Over 200,000 people were internally displaced from the Gulf Coast region to places such as Texas, Florida, Georgia, and Washington, D.C.

For the first couple of days, the country had no idea what was going on until the media (before aid) poured in and exposed the devastation. Within two days, it was reported that an estimated 80,000 people were stranded in New Orleans, with 3,000 evacuees awaiting assistance, food and water at the convention center.

Not only were conditions dangerous with crime was rampant as some survivors began looting. Just concerning was the awful conditions and environments victims were exposed to, the perfect breeding ground for diseases such as hepatitis and cholera.

It was not until Saturday (Sept. 3) that the Superdome was evacuated, trash said to have measured five feet high. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), within the first hundred days of the disaster, approximately 40,000 trailers and housing units became the temporary homes for survivors, who could now be referred to as IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons).

Although victims in New Orleans and around the Gulf region were able to flee and receive some assistance, their struggle for recovery and rebuilding would be met with countless challenges. One year later, the affected areas and many survivors were still nowhere near their goals of reconstructing and returning.

NOW

In FEMA’s five-year commemoration report released this summer, more than 7,700 buildings in Louisiana were destroyed by both Katrina and Rita, though about 85% of them are either rebuilt or currently under construction.

This, however, doesn’t make moving back any easier. Currently there is a huge lack of affordable housing. Many of the IDPs (internally displaced persons) of this disaster are still struggling.

People who have requested grants for rebuilding haven’t been able to get as much money as they expected as the dispersal of funds is very uneven and spread very thin.

Safety and health care are human rights, but there aren’t enough doctors remaining in the area. This is affecting family life, especially families with children, who also have to consider the effects of the disaster on a child’s education and future.

Based on Amnesty International’s “Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement,” the U.S. government violated Principle 18, stating, “All internally displaced persons have the right to an adequate standard of living.”

Not only was this transgressed in the immediate days after Katrina’s landfall—it is still being infringed upon, as many displaced people continue to feel the effects.

Although federal and state officials announced the creation of a $133 million program in November of this year to help Mississippi residents five years after the disaster, more needs to be done in the recovery efforts.

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Want to get involved?
Come to our weekly Amnesty meetings, Wednesdays at 9:15 p.m. in Earl Hall, or email us at cuai-board@columbia.edu.