



Africa: Resettled Refugees Tell of Hardship And Hope

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“We would have nothing to eat for as long as four or five days. I remember eating grass to get the juice from it. Once there was no food or water, and we made ‘potatoes’ out of mud and ate it just to stay alive.”

John Dau spoke quietly, without apparent emotion, as he told of his escape from Sudan during its civil war.

He joined four other resettled refugees from Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, North Korea and Burma at a World Refugee Day forum June 20 moderated by Ellen Sauerbrey, the State Department’s top official for refugee matters.

“People think that if you don’t eat for two or three days, you die,” Dau said. “I can tell you myself: You don’t.” Dau fled to Ethiopia to escape Sudanese government troops. The trek took three months, he said, and during that time he and his companions were subject to starvation and disease. Many died.

In Ethiopia, they were helped by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. But the government of Ethiopia changed, and the new regime told Dau and the other boys he was with that they had just seven days to leave. More died after being fired on by Ethiopian troops as they left. Others were killed by crocodiles or drowned as they tried to swim across the river at the border.

Dau lived in a Kenyan refugee camp in 1994, where, at age 17, he first learned his “ABCs and 1,2,3s,” he said. Now, he added, “I have no parents. Education is my mother and father.” Dau immigrated to the United States in 2001 and now is a student at Syracuse University in upstate New York.

“Americans are so generous, even with people they will never meet,” Dau said. “They are more generous with strangers than with their own families.” Dau was featured in the 2006 documentary film *God Grew Tired of Us*, based on his book of the same title.

A North Korean widow was the newest arrival among the refugee panelists. Yeong Sook Kim said she left North Korea during a famine. Many of her neighbors were starving to death, she said, and after she and her husband went three days with nothing to eat they decided to leave. Yeong crossed illegally into China and spent 10 years there.

“China was difficult,” Yeong said, with eyes glistening and voice husky with emotion. “I had to work as a domestic, but couldn’t get wages” or citizenship. So she went to Thailand, where the United States granted her refugee status. By now a widow and separated from her son during her flight from China, she arrived in the United States in February and concentrated on studying English. The International Rescue Committee,

a nongovernmental organization partly funded by the U.S. government, provided her a place to live in Charlottesville, Virginia, and helped her find a job.

“I am studying hard and working hard,” she said.

The number of refugees who come to the United States each year is more than the combined total for all other countries, Sauerbrey said. Since 1975, she added, the United States has taken in a total of 2.6 million refugees. Sauerbrey heads the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

“We are proud of those numbers,” she added.

Sauerbrey cited the most recent U.S. actions to aid refugees, including providing an additional \$40 million for Palestinian refugees through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. This is in addition to the almost \$1 billion the United States spends annually to alleviate the suffering of millions of refugees caught in crises around the world and help them resettle.

The United States also provides nearly \$80 million to nongovernmental and international organizations for emergency protection and assistance programs for Iraqi refugees in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. (See related article.)

Sauerbrey also encouraged support for the new International Fund for Refugee Women and Children, a public-private partnership to fund refugee relief efforts.

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