

MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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REFUGE

a film by alexandre trudeau and jonathan pedneault

Transcript

ALEX (Voice-Over): How easy it is to forget that Canadians are born into the top one percent of the world's population. The people of Darfur are born into the opposite extreme: the bottom one percent of humankind. The children of Darfur are stuck in the camps of eastern Chad and southwestern Sudan. They number in the millions. Nowhere is a claim to a prosperous, healthy future more uncertain than for these children. The people of Darfur live on the brink, at the very edge of survival. One wrong turn of events and they will fall. For five years now, we have been hearing about Darfur.

Colin Powell: Genocide has been committed, in Darfur.

ALEX (V.O.): The Sudanese government, we hear, has been conducting a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the already desperately poor inhabitants of the harsh region. China, we are told, has been supplying money and political protection to the Sudanese regime in Khartoum in exchange for stakes in the country's oil while, the Janjaweed, nomadic Arabic tribes armed with automatic weapons have provided the muscle. By the millions, the people have fled into camps in Darfur and Chad. But what exactly is happening there now? In July 2007, a young man came to me with precisely that idea of a mission to Darfur. A high-school student, Jonathan Pedneault, had been giving conferences about the horrors of genocide.

JONATHAN (V.O.): I know that the situation in Darfur is unacceptable. The international community has to step up its operations. Maybe my speaking out can encourage people to apply pressure to their governments. We must stop the violence in Darfur.

ALEX (V.O.): Jonathan wants to stop the crisis. I would just like to understand why it is happening. Ethnicity? Climate? Oil? Power politics? Darfur is part of the Sahel, a strip of semi-arid land, which crosses the African continent just south of the Sahara. For years now, the desert has been encroaching on this territory. At the heart of it is something of a paradox: a great freshwater lake. For the past decades, Lake Chad has also been slowly giving way to the desert. But while it remains, water means life. Here on the lake, we begin our journey. Jonathan has never been to Africa. It is important to see not just its troubles but also its beauty.

JONATHAN (V.O.): A long time I have dreamt of Africa, the place where adventure is still possible. And like in a dream, here we are in canoes, floating towards an island village. Like the continent itself, this place is a mish-mash of tribes. From regions that have become increasingly parched, more people come every year to stake a claim to the lake's precious resources. The

island's landmass itself grows every year. The lakeshores pull further away, leaving grass in their wake.

ALEX (V.O.): These beautiful surroundings conceal a hard truth. Life is getting harder and water scarcer in the Sahel and people gather where they can survive. Most end up in the cities. N'Djamena, the capital of Chad, is a hot, dusty and crowded city of the Sahel. For us, it is a necessary stepping-stone on our way to Darfur.

JONATHAN (V.O.): The Sudanese government makes it very difficult for anyone to see what is happening in Darfur. So we are in Chad to get to Darfur through the back door. With the Darfuri rebels. Alex has a contact with the Justice and Equality Movement, or JEM, the largest rebel faction in Darfur. JEM is guerilla army, which has been fighting the Sudan government for many years now. They are fighting for greater rights and wealth for their impoverished and neglected region. Some of the rebel leaders are here in Chad now. Alex wants to hook up with them.

Alex: It's Alex, how are you? I'm Ok. I'm well, thank you. Are you still leaving tomorrow? Can we go with you? Oh, only one car eh? Yes, yes! We're gonna get there, we're gonna get to Abéché and work our way to meet you.

JONATHAN (V.O.): Getting straight to the rebels and straight to Darfur would have been nice. But I am finding things happen slowly in Africa. A few more days in N'Djamena and we find our way onto a humanitarian flight. One thing I hadn't expected here was this great humanitarian machine, rumbling away alongside a human catastrophe. More than ever, I long to connect with the real people suffering down there.

JONATHAN (V.O. cont'd): Our plane touches down in the semi-desert city of Abéché. The capital of Eastern Chad, it is a frenzied and unstable place. Everywhere we look, fighters are lurking.

ALEX (V.O.): The World Food Program stores supply all the food to the refugees of Chad.

Guy from WFP: In the region, there are about 180,000 displaced persons.

Alex: 180,000 displaced persons!

Guy from WFP: And more than 240,000 refugees.

Alex: I see! So 420,000 people!

Guy from WFP: 420,000 people that we feed and that means about 8000 tons of food.

Alex: 8000 tons!

Guy from WFP: Yes, 8000 tons of food a month.

Alex: A month?

Guy from WFP: Yes. This truck is going to Goz Amer. That one to Farchana. This one is at 40 tons. That one at 36, I believe.

ALEX (V.O.): It is a constant struggle to keep the tons and tons of food flowing through this place.

Guy from WFP: Thousands of trucks of food.

Alex: *What distance do these trucks travel?*

Guy from WFP: *About 2500 km.*

Alex: *2500 km!*

Guy from WFP: *2500 km.*

Alex: *It's paved?*

Guy from WFP: *Paved?! It's desert! A desert of sand!*

Alex: *It takes weeks?*

Guy from WFP: *It takes months.*

Alex: *Months?*

Guy from WFP: *No. On average 3 or 4 weeks.*

ALEX (V.O.): Bad or inexistent roads have made getting food to the region very difficult. But an unexpected party is about to change this. The Chinese are building a paved highway, which will connect Abéché to the capital. In the process, the Chinese will take a step closer to realizing the century old French dream of bridging East and West Africa through Chad. Chad's old colonial masters, the French, have convinced other European nations to join a European Union force, Eufor, meant to bring stability to the region. At the headquarters, we are lucky to find the newly arrived French commanding general ready to speak to us. In theory, their mission means protecting the refugees.

Ganascia: *I am here solely to bring protection. Not to do peacekeeping, not to position myself between warring parties but only to bring protection by all means available to a military force. I would say that we are simplifying the task we don't have to consider both those who are armed and those who are attacking, but only those who are attacking.*

ALEX (V.O.): One needs wonder why the world powers bother with this messed-up region at all. Two competing pipelines reach towards this region's oil. From the southwest, a Western pipeline crosses Cameroon to oilfields in Southern Chad. From Port Sudan on the Red Sea, a Chinese pipeline taps the oil just East of Darfur. In the territory between the two pipelines, where we are going, Eastern Chad and Darfur, more oil may lie untapped. And the area continues to be a war zone. The Old Catholic Mission also dates back to the colonial era. But Father Joel Roumeas, the jesuit priest who looks after the place, seems more attached to Africa than to the West.

Rouméas: *Had I stayed in France, I don't know what would have become of me. But I know that after 41 years in Africa, I am a happy priest. I am a real optimist but in all honesty this region is living in an artificial manner. Like someone on life support.*

ALEX (V.O.): In the region there are over 50 UN agencies and NGOS trying to answer the needs of more than 400 000 refugees and displaced persons spread over dozens of camps. And now, a European force.

Rouméas: *They say that they are here to protect the refugees. I doubt that. I think that you have to look for others reasons, for deeper and secret reasons perhaps. Are they here to stop the expansion of Chinese influence in the region? Or because there is expectation of oil? But it is*

absolutely not to protect the refugees. If they are here to protect the refugees, well then, then they must cross the border into Darfur where there is a genocide happening.

JONATHAN (V.O.): By satellite phone, Alex again establishes contact with the Darfuri rebels. The rebel chiefs tell him to head to the border. So we proceed eastwards towards the refugee camps beyond which lies the Sudan. We cross an arid landscape. We also cross immense rivers of sand, the wadis. These fill with water when the rains come. But it is hard to imagine them now. Hard to picture this land fertile. In Farchana, three enormous refugee camps of thousands of people. But they can't feed themselves. Trucks bring the food in and only the minimum. At the camp food stores, the camp is rarely more than a month away from running out of food.

Alex: And these stocks will last how long?

WFP employee: One distribution only...

Jonathan: There is a distribution every month?

WFP employee: Yes, every month.

Alexandre: So all this is one month!

WFP employee: One month.

JONATHAN (V.O.): Juliana, an Italian nurse works with Doctors without Borders at the camp's nutrition clinic.

Juliana: So this is the nutritional center's waiting room.

JONATHAN (V.O.): A severely malnourished child has been brought in.

Juliana: The positive thing about nutrition is that you can have results after 2 or 3 days. Either the child dies, whether the child lives, and then...ouf!

Ibrahim: Since January, there are a lot of problems. The women fight in order to get water. You see they are not filling their jerry cans. They have to take half a jerry can in order to leave for the others. Since there is not enough water for drinking, we cannot wash the children. That causes a lot of diseases.

ALEX (V.O.): Ibrahim Moussa is part of a small Canadian NGO working to keep the rest of the world informed about Darfur.

Ibrahim: My name is Ibrahim Musa Adam. I live in N'djamena, but I'm Sudanese and from Jebel Mara, West Darfur. I am a refugee myself. The organization I work with is Waging Peace Canada, based in Vancouver. The idea came up: why don't we ask the children to express the experiences they had in Darfur in drawings I asked why he made these people in brown colors. He said: the people who attacked us are red. That's Massalit. These ones are Janjaweed.

Alex: The Massalit have helicopters?

Ibrahim: Ah, it belongs to the Janjaweed.

ALEX (V.O.): At a further camp, we look for someone who can tell us more about the attacks. At the school, the camp elders find us our man. The English teacher, Abdoulaye Yaya. Like most people in this camp, Abdoulaye is from the Massalit tribe in Sudan.

Alex: So many people, close together!?!

Abdoulaye: Yeah, because the people have no job, no job...

Alex: And the UN gives land for everyone?

Abd: This is my house, this is my mother's house, and that is my sister's house.

Alex: So the family is here?

Abd: Yeah my family is all here.

Alex: Where are you from?

Abd: From Harara village, Harara.

Alex: Why you leave?

Abd: The Janjaweed attacked us.

Alex: Why the Janjaweed attacked you?

Abd: From the beginning? Ah that's a very long story about the Janjaweed and us. Since more than 20 years we are fighting between Janjawees and Massalit tribe or other tribes. But the government helped them. With horse, with camels, even with airplanes they get help. We try to fight with them but they outnumber us.

Alex: What happened to your village now?

Abd: It's destroyed, they burnt it!

Alex: They burnt it ?

Abd: They burnt it, yes. Now nothing... nothing.

ALEX (V.O.): Abdoulaye is one among hundreds of thousands. But for everyone, the same thing: in the camps, they are trapped in limbo, with no end in sight. From their nearby camp, French soldiers intend to patrol and protect an immense frontier. But against whom are they supposed to use these big guns? We join a patrol mission to a local village.

Alex: We are arriving in which village?

Officer: The village of Sira.

Alex: And why are you here?

Officer: To make them understand a little what our mission here is.

Officer (to children): Who can bring me to the chief? Who can take me? You? Can you take me?

Officer: Our problem is that the region is mostly only Arab-speaking. So hardly anyone speaks French.

Officer: Where is the chief? How do you do?

Chief: Good.

Officer: I have dropped in here to say that we are here and, well, to see whether you have any problems here.

Chief: I do not speak French.

Officer : Yes? You have problems here? Can you translate? Do you understand?

Boy: A little.

Officer: A little. You understand a little. Good. Tell him that I have brought these papers, which explain how to recognize EUFOR troops. He has understood all this? You understand?

Alex: You don't want to hire some local translators?

Officier: That is not my decision.

JONATHAN (V.O.): The United Nations run the odd flight here. We find a spot on a flight, which will take us closer to the Sudanese border.

ALEX (V.O.): Below us the open scrub of Eastern Chad and Darfur, an ancient roving ground, becoming less and less hospitable.

JONATHAN (V.O.): Birak is a village on the Chadian-Sudanese border. It feels like the edge of the world. The rebel leaders told Alex to come here. So here we are. We will finally find out if they will actually bring us into Darfur.

Alex: You're sending two cars to Birak now? OK! Where? Should I meet you at the mosque? The white mosque? Today is good, perfect, no problem! So two cars are coming.

Jonathan: Two cars! No, I am not too worried. I feel everything is going to be alright. In sha Allah, as they say. We put our fate in God's hands.

Alex: Well, I'm concerned that we are going into a war zone with...with the underdogs, who are fighting with vehicles against a well-stocked modern army with planes and helicopters and... the people who live at the compound have been hearing artillery and such so and not far across the border... so who knows, it could be something.

Alex: We are in Birak, a little village very close to the Sudanese border. We've made contact. Seems there's someone coming to get us.

ALEX (V.O.): And suddenly we are off. Squeezed into a rebel vehicle. Surrounded by young fighters.

Jonathan: So we are in a rebel vehicle, on our way to Darfur.

ALEX (V.O.): But first, we wait for night to fall.

JONATHAN (V.O.): At dawn, we awake to our new surroundings. We are in a hide among thorn trees at the foot of a mountain outcropping called the Jebel Mun. Young soldiers go about their morning routine. Every morning they prepare for battle. Protective JuJu charms are donned.

ALEX (V.O.): Our host here is El-Tahir Badawi, a commander with the Justice and Equality Movement, JEM. Tahir was born in a small village just north of the Jebel Mun. But left to the city as a child.

Tahir: I saw my village after 38 years.

ALEX (V.O.): He has left a family and work in the capital to come live a warrior's life in the bush.

Tahir: *I have been here since three and a half year. I have participated in so many battles.*

Alex: *And what did you do before in Khartoum?*

Tahir: *I am an advocate*

Alex: *A lawyer!*

Tahir: *A lawyer, yes.*

Alex: *Why would a lawyer come here to the bush to fight?*

Tahir: *Just seeking for our rights of people.*

ALEX (V.O.): The commanders gather to greet us. They are eager to tell us about the situation in Darfur.

Tahir: *In front of journalists and the eye-witnesses for the world... The purpose of the Sudan's government is to compel this people to get out from their villages.*

Alex: *When we read about these places, we don't hear about the people, we just know about numbers and populations but to be able to have real people, and real faces and real stories help to bring the story of Darfur close to people who are far away in Canada and America.*

Bashir: *My name is Bashir Issa Kadr. I am from South Darfur in a place called Markha.*

Bashir's Translator: *And he is very thankful that you are trying to explain and illustrate our plight to the world. So we take the guns and the weapons so that we can get our rights from this unjust regime in Khartoum. And he says that we took up guns but that we are not warmongers. And we are calling for peace.*

ALEX (V.O.): In these parts, no one stays in one spot for long. While JEM was on the move across the border in Chad, the Sudanese government took advantage of their absence. JEM returned to the area to find widespread destruction.

Alex: *These are destroyed villages, one after the other. Must have been quite a lovely little spot. They say that the Sudanese aircraft and helicopters came and you can even see the bomb marks on the rocks here, they...and then, after the helicopters and bombs came, Janjaweed horseman came and finished it off.*

Tahir: *They burnt everything. They destroyed everything. Even these dead donkeys... These donkeys are not burnt by fire. Somebody shot them down with bullets.*

Rebel guy: *Here, this, and other this one...*

Tahir: *This is a grave. This grave contains 3 people who died in the village.*

ALEX (V.O.): People are buried beneath the sand. Their graves are marked with thorns. And as the winds pass, what trace of these people without tribute or justice will remain?

Tahir: *This is a part of munitions of helicopter. I think the helicopter shot the village with this.*

ALEX (V.O.): A little further another village. The same fate. These women have recently returned to salvage what they could of their possessions.

***Tahir:** The day that they burnt this village an Antonov aircraft, bombed here and killed women and children here. Yes the plane bombed and the Janjaweed fetched the people who were hiding in these mountains. The government of Sudan would like to eradicate everything.*

JONATHAN (V.O.): Shockingly, the attackers didn't even spare a health clinic built with foreign aid.

***Tahir:** This was built by Concern. Irish aid. You see, people get medicine and things here.*

JONATHAN (V.O.): This was equipment for drilling water wells. Ironically, the Sudanese government claims it is urging the villagers to return to their homes.

***Tahir:** When you kill people and burn their villages, even things coming from the International Community, you destroy. How could people come back? I think this is just a lie. Nothing else. They are just lying. And this is just a little of what happens in all Darfur. Just a little. You see?*

JONATHAN (V.O.): Goz Mino camp: a couple of months ago, this place was filled with thousands of displaced people, those who had already fled attacks in their villages. These old women are simply not fit for long journeys towards distant refuges. They scavenge for what food remains.

***Tahir:** They come and try to take what's left of the food. Because they have no food there actually. The government of Sudan instead of giving them food is giving them bombs, and fire, and death.*

JONATHAN (V.O.): These men have come from points of refuge in the desert where their people now gather. They look for anything of use.

***Tahir:** They only have a hope, nothing else.*

ALEX (V.O.): In the midday heat, we find shelter in an abandoned village. A sheep has been roasted for us. Just in case we forgot we are in a war zone, a Sudanese government helicopter approaches.

***Tahir:** No, it doesn't bomb! Doesn't bomb.*

ALEX (V.O.): The boys open fire. The helicopter stays away.

***Tahir:** We are used to this, yes, we are adapted to this, really. Any aircraft that comes across our area and doesn't get permission: we shoot at it.*

ALEX (V.O.): I ask Tahir about the JuJu charms every one seems to be wearing.

Tahir: *This is very old. Inherited from the great, great grandfathers. This is a Hijab. We call it Hijab.*

Alex: *Hijab you call it?*

Tahir: *There are some Qur'an verses written inside. So they think that it gives him a protection.*

Alex: *You don't have this? So that's your protection.*

Tahir: *No, no, no! Really I believe that if the bullet is going to hit you, it will hit you. If it's not going to hit you, it never hits you! But according to my people here, they gave me this, and I can't say I don't want it.*

Alex: *No it's nice!*

Tahir: *Yes, so if you like I could give it to you?*

Alex: *You need it more than me.*

Tahir: *No, no, no! Actually I don't need it. So you can take it.*

Alex: *Oh, thank you!*

Tahir: *You're welcome.*

ALEX (V.O.): These rebels face death at any time. Yet they fight because they have no choice. They are caught up in a cycle of violence. The government attacks their people because they resist. And the rebels resist because the government attacks their people. Those who are not here fighting, rot away in the camps. For now, the rebels aren't strong enough to push the government out of Darfur. But the government also fails to eradicate them. The slow war goes on.

ALEX (V.O. cont'd): After several days in the Jebel Mun with a Darfuri rebel army, it is time to move on.

Alex: *Salaam Aleykum.*

Hamed: *Aleykum Salaam.*

ALEX (V.O.): Amazingly, I recognize one of the rebels from Baghdad from when I was covering the war in Iraq.

Alex: *I remember seeing you at the Rasheed Hotel, where you worked?*

Hamed: *When you enter Rasheed Hotel...*

Alex: *You wore the warrior uniform?*

Hamed: *Yes... you remember that!*

ALEX (V.O.): Hamed sought a better life in Iraq. A born warrior, he fought in Iraq's many wars. Hamed worked as a doorman at the Rashid Hotel before the American invasion.

Alex: *And now you're here in Jebel Mun.*

Hamed: *Yeah.*

Alex: *But this is your home I think.*

ALEX (V.O.): Now he is back in his homeland, the Jebel Mun, fighting for his people.

Hamed's Translator: *But the war here now in Darfur is our cause. And the cause of all Darfuris. And he says that there is obvious injustice. So this is our war.*

Alex: It's a fight for freedom?

Hamed: For freedom!

ALEX (V.O.): He agrees to take us back to Chad, where his family and people have fled.

Alex: Why do we move slow?

Hamed: We move slow because this area, we feel, is not secure. If the soldiers see the dust from a far distance, they think that there are vehicles in this area. Therefore we go slow because of the dust. You see these sacks belongs to...

Alex: The camps?

Hamed: They were IDPs before. Now they became refugees.

ALEX (V.O.): Right in Chad, groups of people huddle together in the desert. They have been here over a month. With little shade or shelter, food or water. They wait for help.

Hamed: She says that the government push them here.

Alex: Planes or Janjaweed?

Hamed: Yeah she says, the Janjaweed and airplane. Why they bomb this? Why they bomb these poor people? And they know where the JEM fighters are. They are around Jebel Mun and they know! These are only poor people. They think these people are the family of JEM fighters. If they bomb them and they kill them, we will come back and we say sorry and make peace. That is what they feel!

Alex: Did they kill many people in her village?

Hamed: She say that at that time... We couldn't count who died. Only... everybody run away. She say that aircraft bombed the village and who is dead is dead... Those who remained came here. The big problem now is... They have no security first of all. They have no food. They have nothing to defend themselves. They can only run away.

Alex: And where is she going now?

Hamed: She says that they wait for UN trucks to pick them up and take them somewhere they don't know.

ALEX (V.O.): After a month and half, the UN have finally organized the means to fetch these refugees. They are packed into the trucks. They are carried to a distant camp. Here they will be fed and sheltered.

JONATHAN (V.O.): I can't begin to imagine their feelings. Whether they are happy to be out of the desert. Or just plain anxious to understand what is happening to them. Who knows how long they will stay in the camps? Five, ten, twenty years maybe! The thought of their ordeal makes me shudder.

ALEX (V.O.): This situation cannot go on forever. These people could not survive here, were it not for outside assistance.

Rouméas: Once the military presence here will end, what will remain? Once all this refugee assistance will stop, because it can't go on forever, this land will come crashing down.

Ganascia: *The determination of success will be totally political. Figures of authority way above my head will make judgments according to their own criterias. In a year, when we leave, if everything falls apart, then Europe will have spent a lot of money and sweat for nothing.*

Alex: *And personally what would you like to do after the war?*

Hamed's Translator: *Ah, he's going to retire!*

Alex: *Retire! Your sons can work! And you, what would you like to do, if there's peace, when there's peace.*

Tahir: *If peace comes, I think, really, I would like to go back to my work as an advocate. And also I would like to go and teach at the university. Yes, these are my wishes.*

Alex: *How long do you think you will stay here?*

Abd: *In my mind? Maybe two years, maybe more than that. I don't know exactly.*

ALEX (V.O.): As they wait for something to happen, they risk being forgotten. One major crisis somewhere else and food donations could be deployed elsewhere and there will be no refuge here at all.

JONATHAN (V.O.): On my return, I continue giving conferences. For me, ethnic cleansing is no longer an abstraction. I am referring to a world I know a little better. But the better I know the world, its tragedy, the less I feel I can change it. How much longer will we be able to feed these millions of refugees and displaced peoples? Who will stop the Sudanese government's reign of terror in Darfur? And how? I don't know anymore if my words bring hope to the people of Darfur. But I can't stop speaking out for them. If only to say they exist. They live in us. And us in them.

ALEX (V.O.): Back home, I get terrible news from the Sudan. Ten days after our separation, El-Tahir Badawi, our host in the Jebel Mun, was killed in battle. I made the mistake of thinking that you, Tahir, of all people was protected and would survive. I try to remind myself how privileged we are. But I am haunted by what I have seen. Darfur may be at the edge of the world. But it is so central as well. It is a front line for climate change. And a front line in the global contest for resources: For water, for food, for oil. Darfur is a dark revelation of the violence this struggle brings out in us. It is a place without refuge. And I fear a world with more and more Darfurs.

[END]