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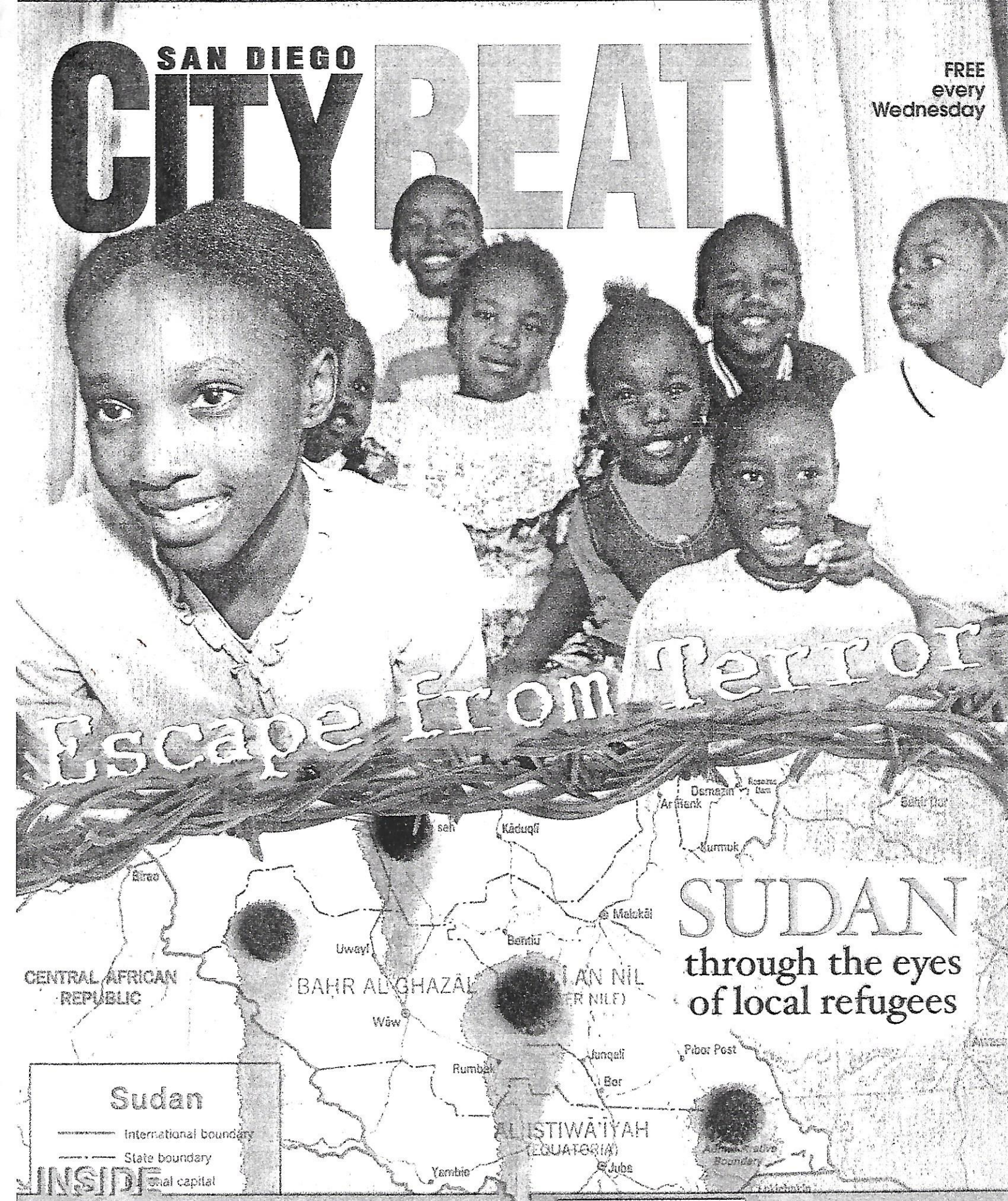

Escape from Terror

SUDAN
through the eyes of local refugees

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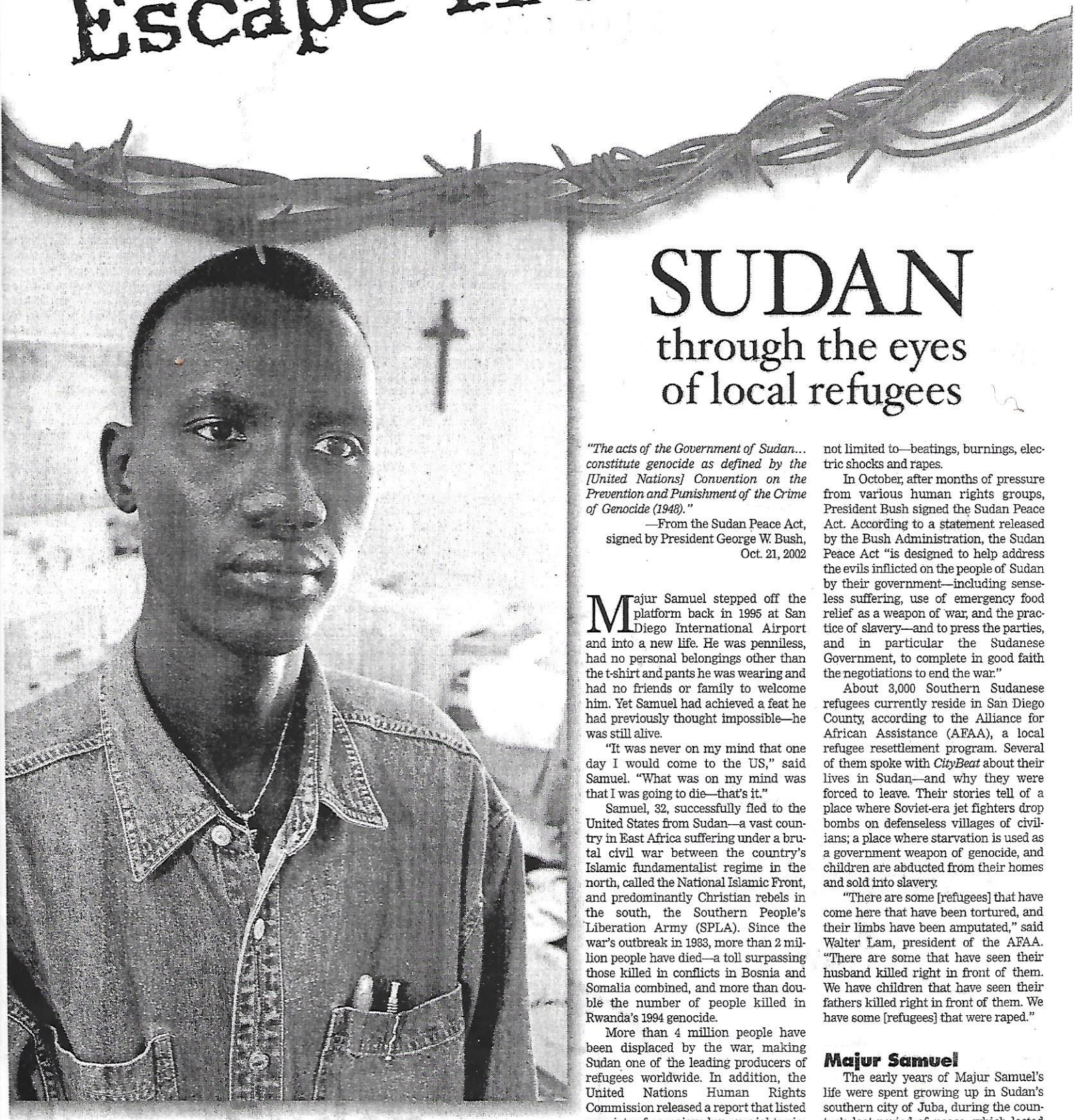


SUDAN
through the eyes of local refugees

"The acts of the Government of Sudan... constitute genocide as defined by the [United Nations] Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948)."

—From the Sudan Peace Act, signed by President George W. Bush, Oct. 21, 2002

Majur Samuel stepped off the platform back in 1995 at San Diego International Airport and into a new life. He was penniless, had no personal belongings other than the t-shirt and pants he was wearing and had no friends or family to welcome him. Yet Samuel had achieved a feat he had previously thought impossible—he was still alive.

"It was never on my mind that one day I would come to the US," said Samuel. "What was on my mind was that I was going to die—that's it."

Samuel, 32, successfully fled to the United States from Sudan—a vast country in East Africa suffering under a brutal civil war between the country's Islamic fundamentalist regime in the north, called the National Islamic Front, and predominantly Christian rebels in the south, the Southern People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Since the war's outbreak in 1983, more than 2 million people have died—a toll surpassing those killed in conflicts in Bosnia and Somalia combined, and more than double the number of people killed in Rwanda's 1994 genocide.

More than 4 million people have been displaced by the war, making Sudan one of the leading producers of refugees worldwide. In addition, the United Nations Human Rights Commission released a report that listed a variety of egregious human rights violations committed by the Sudanese government, which have included—but are not limited to—beatings, burnings, electric shocks and rapes.

In October, after months of pressure from various human rights groups, President Bush signed the Sudan Peace Act. According to a statement released by the Bush Administration, the Sudan Peace Act "is designed to help address the evils inflicted on the people of Sudan by their government—including senseless suffering, use of emergency food relief as a weapon of war, and the practice of slavery—and to press the parties, and in particular the Sudanese Government, to complete in good faith the negotiations to end the war."

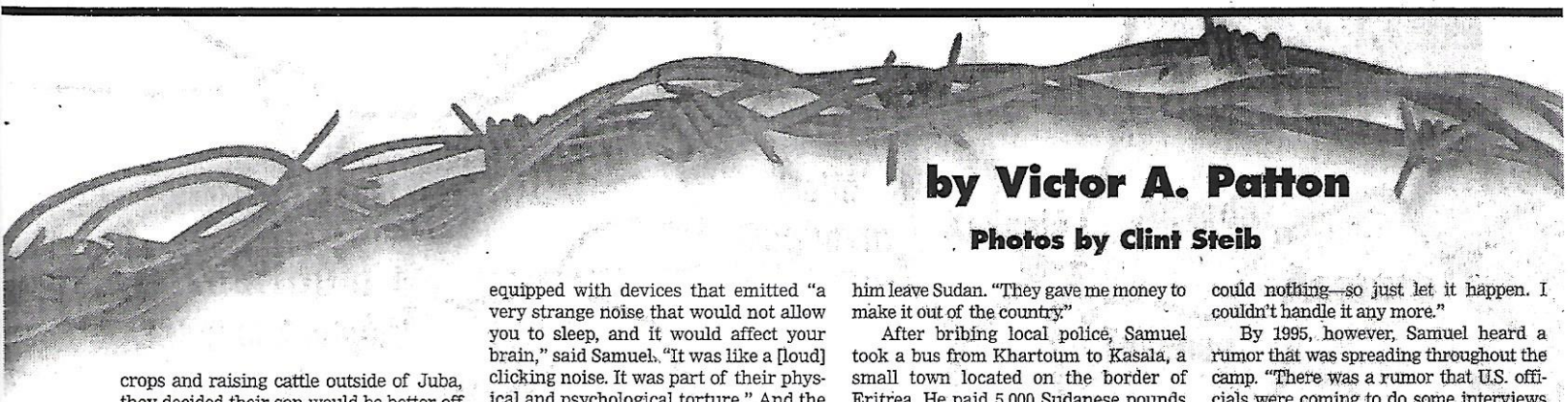
About 3,000 Southern Sudanese refugees currently reside in San Diego County, according to the Alliance for African Assistance (AFAA), a local refugee resettlement program. Several of them spoke with *CityBeat* about their lives in Sudan—and why they were forced to leave. Their stories tell of a place where Soviet-era jet fighters drop bombs on defenseless villages of civilians; a place where starvation is used as a government weapon of genocide, and children are abducted from their homes and sold into slavery.

"There are some [refugees] that have come here that have been tortured, and their limbs have been amputated," said Walter Lam, president of the AFAA. "There are some that have seen their husband killed right in front of them. We have children that have seen their fathers killed right in front of them. We have some [refugees] that were raped."

Majur Samuel

The early years of Majur Samuel's life were spent growing up in Sudan's southern city of Juba, during the country's last period of peace, which lasted from 1972 to 1983. Although Samuel's parents made their living cultivating

Majur Samuel, a victim of oppression for openly advocating Christianity in his native Sudan, managed to survive a brutal regimen of captivity and torture. He now lives in San Diego.



by Victor A. Patton

Photos by Clint Steib

crops and raising cattle outside of Juba, they decided their son would be better off living with his aunt in the city, where he could attend school and eventually receive a university education.

In 1983, however, war had erupted, after then-president Jaafar al-Nimeiri decided to impose Islamic Sharia laws throughout the entire country—including the predominantly Christian south. Tenets of Sharia law include cutting off the limbs of accused thieves and arresting those suspected of preaching any religion other than Islam. Sudanese government troops spread across southern Sudan in an attempt to defeat the SPLA.

"They were trying to impose those laws on us, and we are Christians," said Samuel. "The southerners are viewed second-class citizens, as infidels [by the government]—those who don't believe in God. We are seen as being nasty and evil. That was when I was 11 years old. And it was terrible, because I remember a lot of people being killed."

During the war, Samuel had managed to move his education forward, and by 1991 had become a student leader at the University of Juba, which had been relocated to Sudan's capitol city, Khartoum. Like all Sudanese citizens, Samuel had to pass Islamic theology courses in order to receive his high school diploma, but he continued to practice Christianity. He began to speak out against the government imposition of Islam on non-Muslims, and he taught Christianity to local schoolchildren—an act that raised the ire of government officials.

"I taught that my brothers and sisters who are in the university, especially our Christian sisters, should not be forced to wear Islamic clothes," he said. "The university should be a free environment where you can dress in whatever you want. [The government] didn't like that."

Samuel and five of his colleagues were subsequently arrested by the Sudanese "secret police" for their activities, and taken to the military headquarters in Khartoum, referred to many Sudanese as "the ghost house."

"It was like being kidnapped by a group of thugs," Samuel said. "All night they had been beating us."

After being beaten, Samuel was separated from his friends and placed in a tiny cell, where he was confined for more than 23 hours a day. The cell, said Samuel, was approximately three and a half feet wide, with hardly any room to stand, and no room to stretch out his legs. He was forced to sleep on the cement floor and was taken from his cell for three 15-minute periods per day. To make matters even worse, each prisoner at the facility was given only one minute twice per-day to use one of the two toilets in the entire facility. That meant that Samuel, as well as the other inmates, were forced to sleep on their cell floor in their own feces.

Even sleep was not a luxury afforded inmates at the ghost house. The jail was equipped with devices that emitted "a very strange noise that would not allow you to sleep, and it would affect your brain," said Samuel. "It was like a [loud] clicking noise. It was part of their physical and psychological torture." And the beatings continued, sometimes lasting for hours. Samuel recalled how his attackers would twist his limbs into awkward positions to near breaking point behind his back.

Samuel lived to tell about the beatings—others weren't so lucky.

"In cell number 14, I remember a guy from southern Sudan who was accused of supporting and supplying the rebels with food," Samuel said. "He had been crying all night long." The man died, an apparent victim of both starvation and severe physical abuse.

Samuel recalled how another man had received repeated beatings to his kidneys and was later released—dying. The man was so badly injured that "after seven days, he died." Samuel said he heard that the man begged his family not to tell anyone that he had been tortured—for fear that the secret police would return and torture him again.

> **"If you have a gun, you survive in Africa."**
> ***—Majur Samuel***

Samuel was detained for two months until officials from Amnesty International heard about his case and interceded, demanding that he and the other students be released. "I remember after 2 in the morning I was dumped on the street, and I had to walk for miles to go home. Without pressure from Amnesty International, I wouldn't have survived," he said.

"It was a good thing that I was arrested in front of the other students, because if I disappeared, it would be known that the government secret police had killed me. But if they catch you in secret, where no one sees you being arrested—then you are gone. There are friends of mine, because they exposed their views, they perished—and no one knows where they are."

Although Majur had survived his stay at the ghost house, he knew that the police would probably come back for him—only the next time he would not leave the ghost house alive. "They told me, 'If we ever arrest you again, you will never see the sun again.' I thought, 'Well, these guys don't play. They will do it.' So I decided to leave the country. Upon my release, I wrote a letter to the American Embassy in Khartoum. I wrote to [U.S.] Ambassador [Don] Peterson about what I was facing and that I had to get out of the country."

Within two weeks the American Embassy answered Samuel's plea, saying his case would be transferred to the U.S. Agency for International Development, a relief organization. Officials at the agency, in conjunction with the American Embassy, according to Samuel, helped him leave Sudan. "They gave me money to make it out of the country."

After bribing local police, Samuel took a bus from Khartoum to Kasala, a small town located on the border of Eritrea. He paid 5,000 Sudanese pounds (about $3) to local residents to guide him across the Sudan-Eritrea border and had made it out of Sudan—but his journey was by no means over. The looming possibility of being deported back to Sudan was ever-present.

His subsequent travels across the East African terrain would be a day-to-day succession of bribing police and residents to help him move from one place to another. Along his journey, Samuel would be briefly held at a refugee camp in Ethiopia—until a friend had him and some other refugees bribed out of the camp and paid their bus fare to the Kenya. After arriving in Kenya, however, he was detained and sentenced for illegal entry. Samuel was then sent to Ifo refugee camp, located near the border of Kenya and Somalia.

Although Ifo refugee camp was relatively far away from the ghost houses of Sudan, it too was a dangerous place. Armed gunmen and rebels from neighboring conflicts in Ethiopia, Uganda and Somalia, Samuel said, would frequently raid the camp. Although the camp was under the banner of the United Nations, there was little security, leaving thousands of refugees vulnerable.

"The rebels would come in. They have a presumption that there is food in the camp, and they come and take whatever they want. If you resist them, you will die," said Samuel. Women were especially vulnerable to the outsiders. Rape was common. "Sometimes they will tell the women, 'You are going with us.' If the women refuse, they will kill the women."

Complicating the situation further, massive food shortages in the camp were causing many refugees to starve. And the relief food that did come into the camp would be stolen. "If you have a gun, you survive in Africa," said Samuel. "People [with guns] will come into the camp and say, 'We need all of your stuff.' And if they have guns, they will take it. The food was sent over, but these corrupt people would take it to the market and sell it, or they would use the food for their own use."

After months of living in the camp, surviving from the leaves of trees, Samuel had nearly given up on his life. He was starving, and growing weaker as time went by. "I am going to be here until the day that I die," Samuel recalled thinking to himself. "I couldn't even think about [escaping] to Nairobi [Kenya's capital city]. I would be detained, put in jail, and they would bring me right back to the camp.... I got to the point where I didn't even care. If [the rebels] come and kill me, I don't care. What am I going to do? I could nothing—so just let it happen. I couldn't handle it any more."

By 1995, however, Samuel heard a rumor that was spreading throughout the camp. "There was a rumor that U.S. officials were coming to do some interviews with refugees. I didn't think about it—but it happened."

The U.S. officials were a group of officers from the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) who were accepting applications from refugees seeking relocation to the United States. Samuel was accepted. Within weeks he would be on a plane headed for San Diego—a city he had never even heard of. But that didn't matter—his experience in Sudan was over.

"What I went through was the worst thing anyone could go through," said Samuel. "You're powerless."

Agnes Lengi Hassan

Like many young girls growing up in southern Sudan, civil war for Agnes Lengi Hassan, 33, would mean permanent separation from her parents and loved ones. Following the outbreak of the war, Hassan's hometown of Lafan became a battleground between government forces and the SPLA.

Her father, a prison warden, began to fear for the safety of his children—especially his daughters'—as the town became a war zone. "[By that time] the government and the rebels were shooting each other," said Hassan. "My father said it wasn't a good idea for us to live there—particularly for us, because the army was raping girls.

"If you go to the airport in Juba, there is a lot of displaced women and children, sleeping in the airport, because the soldiers are doing bad things in the town. They're bombing people everyday. There is no food; there are a lot of diseases. Life is very bad."

An older sister of Hassan lived up north in Khartoum, which was far from the war's frontline—although it was under the firm control of the Islamist government. Hassan spent the next few years of her life living with her sister in Khartoum—and would never see her parents alive again.

Although she believes her father was abducted and killed by the government forces, she received word that her mother died in a Ugandan refugee camp in 1999. "My family disappeared. My father, my mother, all my brothers—everybody."

Because of Muslim Sharia law, Hassan would have to feign a Muslim identity in order to get by, even though she is a Christian. "We were forced to go to Arab schools where we had to cover ourselves and attend Islam classes," said Hassan. "For you to pass high school, you have to pass religion [Islam]. If you don't, you won't get your high school diploma."

Although Hassan and her sister's family did the best they could to maintain a sense of normalcy, it would not be long before the Sudanese secret police began asking questions, especially since

Continued on Page 16

nes Iengi Hassan escaped wartorn Sudan only to be forced to live, homeless and nniless, in a dangerous refugee camp on the Ethiopia-Kenya border. She's been in n Diego since 1994.

Hassan's older sister was married to a Sudanese employee of USAID. "The government started accusing him of being a spy and giving out government secrets," said Hassan. "One of his friends told him, 'Man, if you stay here, you will lose.' A lot of people were disappearing. Even one of my sisters—her husband disappeared. We don't know where he is. They will come to your house and say, 'Excuse me, we want you.' And nobody will see you after that. My sister's husband told us, 'We have to find a way to get out of Khartoum.'"

In 1991, Hassan, along with her boyfriend, Hassan Abuk, her sister and brother-in-law, decided to fly to Nairobi to escape from Khartoum—only they would have to travel separately in order not to arouse suspicion. Although they made out of Khartoum safely, in Nairobi they were homeless and penniless. "We went to the United Nations to say that we ran from Sudan and that we have nowhere to go. They said, 'If you become refugees here, you have to go and live in the refugee camp. You cannot live in Nairobi."

The group was transferred to Walda refugee camp on the Ethiopia-Kenya border. They were provided a tent, blankets (which they used as beds) and a cup of beans with a bowl of wheat to last for two weeks. Ethiopia, at the time, was in the final stages of ending its own civil war, and bands of gunmen were prevalent in the area. The 35,000 refugees at Walda provided an easy target. "The Ethiopian rebels would come at night and start slaughtering people. Every morning you would see where they had slaughtered fathers, mothers and children in their homes," Hassan said.

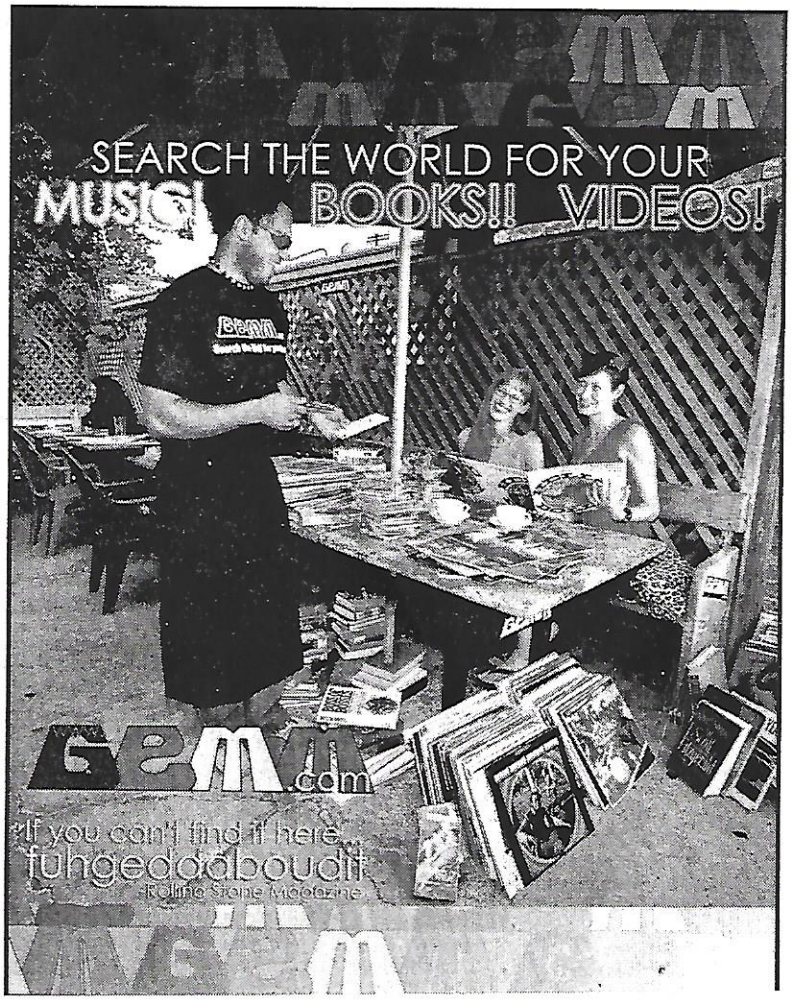
During her time at Walda, Hassan witnessed a brutal confrontation between Sudanese and Somali refugees that resulted in bloodshed. The Kenyan military was called in to break up the conflict. "It was just like being in Sudan again," Hassan recalled. "There was shooting, there was bombs—in the refugee camp. The UN decided to close that camp."

Afterward, Hassan and her family transferred to Ifo, the same refugee camp where Samuel had been sent. The situation at Ifo, said Hassan, was little better than what she had experienced at Walda. Local Somali bandits, known as "shiftas" would enter the camps frequently, carrying assault rifles, raping and killing as they looted the refugee population. Hassan's weight by that time had dropped to 80 pounds, due to the lack of food available. She also had her first daughter, Pauline. "There was nothing for the baby. [The UN] gave the children glucose in order for them to survive.

"When the UN would give us food, the same night [the shiftas] would come into that camp, and they would start shooting people. They took everything that the UN gave us. Water and everything that we had, they would take. And they would rape a lot of women. We would run to the bushes and hide. And when we would come out in the morning, not even a single policeman came to see what was happening. In the morning [the policemen] would come and collect the dead bodies."

Hassan's fear for her and her daughter's safety had become so great that she tried to escape from the camp with her child, only to be captured by police and taken back. "It was like we were being tortured even worse in the refugee camp than we were in Sudan," said Hassan. "For the refugees, we are thinking that we are being protected by the UN—but there is no protection for any of the refugees. For refugees, they suffer in their country, but they suffer even more in the refugee camp. There's no food, no security, and you can't even sleep because you don't know who's going to kill you at night."

By 1993, however, Hassan had been given



renewed hope. Abuk, whom she had married, was accepted for resettlement in the United States. That meant chances were good that Hassan and her daughter would also be allowed to come to the U.S., especially since she was pregnant with Abuk's second child.

"We were supposed to come [to the U.S.] together, but they told me that because I was pregnant I couldn't come, and that as soon as I had the baby, I could come." After Abuk left for the United States, Hassan was subsequently sent to a transit camp to await transportation to the U.S.—and told that she would have to return to Ifo. Breaking into tears, Hassan could not bear the thought of returning to the refugee camp, fearing for both her and her daughter's life. "I was crying like hell. I went on my knees and begged this [UN official] to please put me somewhere [else]," Hassan said.

"He saw my stomach was big, and he sympathized with me. He wrote me a letter, saying that I would have to go live in a hotel until I joined my husband. I couldn't even believe that. They gave me a hotel in Nairobi, a hotel for UN people. At that time I just thanked God. This man really felt my pain. I do not even know his name."

Two months after giving birth to her son, Abak, on May 5, 1994, Hassan joined her husband in San Diego. "I came with no pocket money, nothing," said Hassan. "My grandparents have suffered, my mother and father have suffered, and we have suffered. And I don't want my children to suffer."

Slavery and Religion

Covering an area of nearly a million miles, Sudan is the largest country in Africa—as well as one of the most diverse. Named after the Arabic phrase *"bilad al-sudan,"* or "land of the Blacks," Sudan is a country of more than 56 ethnic groups, with more than 100 languages and dialects (Arabic is the official language). Although the reasons for the current conflict in Sudan are many, Sudan's modern legacy can be traced to the Berlin Conference of 1855, a meeting between the major western powers, which included Great Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal and Spain.

The purpose of the Berlin Conference was to draw colonial lines of conquest across the African continent—lines which currently make up the modern-day borders of nearly every African country, including Sudan. According to journalist Scott Peterson, in his book, *Me Against My Brother: At War In Somalia, Sudan, and Rwanda*, these borders "diced up the continent with little reference to tribe or nation and also demarcated impossible borders for Sudan. North and south were bound together into one country, the largest in Africa, and allocated for British rule.... Following the time-honored practice of divide and rule, Britain encouraged north and south differences and legally enforced them to prevent any rise of nationalism."

Making matters worse, Sudan is a country where the north is predominantly Arab and Islamic, and the south is predominantly Black and Christian (many southern Sudanese also practice their own traditional spiritual systems). At the time of Sudanese independence in 1955, southern Sudanese held less than 1 percent of administrative posts in Sudan's government. Fearing northern hegemony would threaten the freedom of southern Sudan, on Aug. 18, 1955, a military unit composed of southern Sudanese mutinied against the northern government, setting the war into motion.

A peace agreement was signed between the rebels and the government in 1972, which granted self-rule to southern Sudan, as well as freedom of religion. In 1983, however, the war erupted again after then-President Nimeiri abrogated the 1972 agreement, and imposed Islamic Sharia law across the country.

Although religion appears to be a primary reason behind the war in Sudan, many believe that southern Sudan's rich resources—and north's lack of—are the real underlying factor. Nearly all of the Sudan's oil, a primary import, comes from the south. And while most of the north is barren and dry desert land, in the south "there are many resources—oil, arable lands that can be used for planting, and minerals," said Joseph Jok, a Sudanese refugee and program manager at the International Rescue Commission.

BBC correspondent Andrew Harding, who recently reported from southern Sudan, said oil "has been discovered right across southern Sudan.... Government forces have launched a scorched-earth policy to drive civilians—and the rebels who live among them—out of the oil fields. That is where the helicopter gunships have come in handy."

One of the most controversial aspects of the war is the allegation that for decades the northern government has condoned and actively sponsored the trafficking of Black slaves from the south. According to Anti-Slavery International, between 5,000 and 14,000 people have been abducted and forced into slavery in Sudan since 1983. According to Loyola Marymount University Professor Joc Madut, who wrote a book called *War and Slavery in Sudan*, the northern government is known for arming militias who then raid villages in Southern Sudan, abducting women and children to be used as slaves and concubines in the north.

"The issue of slavery has been going on in Sudan since the 19th century, and it resurged in full force in 1983," said Madut. "The government in Khartoum decided that slavery might be another powerful weapon of war. The point is that if you carry out these [slave] raids, create havoc throughout the south, and abduct, rape, kill and loot, then you will have denied the SPLA [rebels] their support base among the civilians."

San Diego: A New Life

Making the transition from a world of roving gunmen, death and abject poverty to one characterized by rush-hour traffic, strip-malls, 39-cent-meal deals and endless bills might not seem difficult for Sudanese refugees on the surface—considering their previous lives. Adjusting to American culture and making ends meet on minimum wage, however, comes with its own set of challenges.

"They come here very determined to get jobs and become self-sufficient," said Walter Lam of the Alliance for African Assistance, adding that it is not unheard of for many Sudanese to work 16 hours a day at minimum-wage jobs after arriving in the U.S.

Lam himself knows the difficulty of refugee life, having come to the U.S. from Uganda following a coup there in 1983. "A lot of them are working so hard because they are supporting their relatives who are still overseas. Africans have extended families," said Lam. "It would be a serious crime for us to get here and forget about our families who are still overseas. There is very big business here for Western Union wiring money."

For Samuel, coming to San Diego after leaving Ifo refugee camp was an "unusual" experience. "Everyone here is so busy doing their work, and they don't have time for you," he said. "It was like coming to the camp—you don't know anybody else. Where are you going to stay? How is the life? All of these kinds of questions come into your mind."

Upon his arrival in San Diego, he was set up with an apartment through a local refugee resettlement agency and worked a series of jobs through a temporary service before being permanently hired as program manag-

er at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, which has a large Sudanese congregation. "Sometimes the resettlement agencies cannot help us with food—but the church provided food for us," he said. "The church really did a lot to help us."

Although San Diego may be a less violent place than Sudan, Hassan, who now works as an outreach worker for the AAFA, found that San Diego was not as peaceful as she had hoped—and she has traumatic reminders of Sudan. "Every night I hear gunshots," she said, referring to the City Heights apartment where she lives with her five children. "It just makes me think a lot about what was happening before. I thought I would be living in a peaceful place without hearing gunshots or people killing each other."

"San Diego is expensive place to live. And the culture is really different from what they are used to," said Rev. David Montzingo, the rector at St. Luke's. "Sudanese people are used to a collaborative way of doing things, extended families with a lot of relationships. [Americans] are real individualistic and very competitive. Our culture is not going to change to meet their needs—they have to change."

Currently in San Diego there are about 100,000 refugees from various countries around the world, according to Lam, including Sudan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Liberia, Vietnam, Bosnia and the former U.S.S.R. Of the refugees living in San Diego, about 13,000 come from Africa. "There's a lot, at the moment, coming from Afghanistan," he said.

Sudan: What's Next?

Although no end appears to be in sight for the war in Sudan, many international human-rights organizations have praised the signing of the Sudan Peace Act as a step in the right direction. According to the provisions of the act, if the government of Sudan does not negotiate in "good faith" with the SPLA, the United States can "take all necessary and appropriate steps to deny Sudan government access to oil revenues in order to ensure that funds are not used for military purposes" and "seek a UN Security Council resolution for an arms embargo on the Sudanese government." The act also authorizes aid to Southern Sudan in the amount of $300 million over the next three years, even without the approval of the northern government.

"It's a significant step, but it all depends on the willingness of Washington to implement it. At this point, no one can say whether or not it will work for sure," said Madut. "If the Sudanese government does not comply, then by law the United States government is obliged to do something." Madut added that a solution to the war in Sudan be reached by two methods. Either the south is allowed to vote on a referendum regarding self-governance, or totally secede from northern Sudan. Madut said that after more than 40 years of war, the latter is a more feasible option for Sudan.

"Both sides have to part ways," he said.

Regardless of the outcome of the Sudan Peace Act, or the war on Sudan, neither Hassan nor Samuel expressed plans to ever return to Sudan, and both have become American citizens within the past two years.

"If [the Sudanese government] wanted us to be one country, they would not have waged the war for all these years," Samuel said. "The more they wage it, the more we hate them. We need to have a period of healing. You need to give us time. But if they keep oppressing us, we will never get along."

"Southern Sudanese, we've never had a taste of life," said Hassan. "We never have tasted the goodness of life—just suffering, suffering and more suffering." ♦