Out of Africa: misrepresenting Sudan’s ‘Lost Boys’

by Brandy Witthoft

The US media has taken an intense interest in the experience of a relatively small group of young males who walked from South Sudan to Ethiopia, spent up to a decade in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya and were eventually re-settled in the USA in 2001. What is behind the celebrity status – and the cultural misunderstanding – of those dubbed the ‘Lost Boys’?

UNHCR reports that 12,700 persons from minority groups have so far returned to Kosovo (6,000 Serbs, 3,300 Egyptians, 1,400 Roma and 1,150 Bosniaks). IDPs from Serbia mostly return to rural areas where they constitute a majority. Urban returns are still lagging hugely behind. The small number of returns is mainly due to the poor security situation (where violent attacks on returnees are commonplace), lack of freedom of movement, bleak economic prospects and the uncertain future status of Kosovo. Displaced people are routinely prevented from recovering their homes or agricultural land, receiving compensation for destroyed property or receiving rent from properties.

In June 2006 a protocol on voluntary and sustainable return was signed between UNMIK, the provisional self-government of Kosovo and the government of Serbia to establish preconditions for sustainable and voluntary return of IDPs to Kosovo. This document could pave the way for belated reversal of conflict-related population movements but much will depend on its implementation. Much more needs to be done to establish a secure environment for sustainable return, to guarantee returnees access to services and to promote reintegration. Ethnically-based crimes and incidents must be investigated and avenues for redress established.

Looking ahead

The decision on the final status of Kosovo – originally expected in November 2006 – will undoubtedly have an impact on regional stability. It could either trigger new waves of displacement or provide a framework for the resolution of age-old strife. A creative solution will look for common interests, rather than divisions. No sides should be given any excuses for undermining the return process.

Our experience shows that no equitable solution can be found without a comprehensive dialogue between ethnic communities, using all available fora and procedures. An essential part of the dialogue is the commitment of leaders on all levels to encourage their constituencies to interact. Security, financial support and psychological motivation are vital for sustainable return, as is the participation of minority communities in the negotiations and public administration of Kosovo. For its part, Serbia needs to ensure full realisation of rights by IDPs during their displacement and facilitation of conditions in which they can reach a free and informed decision on whether to return or integrate.

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While working for a programme to integrate the ‘Lost Boys’ in Syracuse, New York state, I became aware that there are significant discrepancies between typical media narration of their collective experience and the recollections of individuals. Glib articles have focused on aloneness, resilience and wandering and ignored the key questions such as: how did a large number of male – but hardly any female – adolescents become separated from their families and survive a traumatic experience apparently unaided?

Host-country media constructions of migrants and refugees shape the way they are received. US print media, the Internet and church groups have endlessly retold and reshaped their
Peter Dut, ‘Lost Boys’, collects supermarket trolleys, Olathe, Kansas

The media and the Internet are replete with misrepresentations:

“A group of 20,000 young boys formed, wandering the desert seeking safety. They became known as the ‘Lost Boys of Sudan.’ The boys crossed hundreds of miles of desert. They faced enemy fire, lion attack and hunger. Thousands died along the way. The survivors found safe haven in UN refugee camps in Ethiopia and then Kenya. With peace in the Sudan unforeseeable and without family or opportunity in the camp, the US government decided to bring the ‘Lost Boys to America. In 2001, four thousand of the boys, who are now young men, were given high priority refugee status and began settling all across America—from Houston to Kansas City, San Jose to Little Rock.” Publicity for ‘Lost Boys’ film.

“As a boy of seven I ran barefoot and naked into the night and joined up with streams of other boys trying to escape death or slavery … Bullets replaced food, medicine, shelter and my loving parents. I lived on wild vegetables, ate mud from Mother Earth and drank urine from my own body.”

Stereotypes are reinforced by US aid agencies:

“Named after Peter Pan’s cadre of orphans, some 26,000 Sudanese boys were forced by violence from their southern Sudan villages … thousands died along the way—they drowned, were eaten by wild animals, shot by military forces or overcome by hunger, dehydration or fatigue … Older boys—some just nine or ten—looked after the youngest ones and small cliques of boys formed their own family groups. Their only relief came when Red Cross helicopters dropped them food or water.” American Red Cross

“No more than six or seven years old, they fled to Ethiopia to escape death or induction into slavery and the northern army. They walked a thousand miles through lion and crocodile country, eating mud to stave off thirst and starvation. Wandering for years, half of them died before reaching the Kenyan refugee camp, Kakuma.” International Rescue Committee

Interviews with individual ‘Lost Boys’ suggest a very different reality. Their accounts confirm long-established anthropological research findings: southern Sudanese boys do not hang around in their villages but may have to roam far in order to find grazing for their families’ cattle herds. Male adolescents are traditionally expected to fend for themselves and to develop strong bonds with their age mates. When their home villages were attacked, many were far away in cattle camps. Unable to return, did they really set off on an epic trek—unprompted and without compasses or geographical knowledge?

Rädda Barnen researchers first cast doubt on the naive flight narrative in a 1994 report. They suggested that the group was guided to Ethiopian refugee camps by units of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army—the main southern Sudanese opposition, now leading the government of South Sudan. My interviews confirmed this is what happened as the ‘Lost Boys’ roamed hither and thither, uncertain where to go and unaware of the movements of Sudanese government forces. Far from being left to their own devices, they said groups were often accompanied by a few adults and that other adults guided and helped them. One, who was six at the time, describes being carried much of the way by his uncle.

The ex-‘Boys’ tell a story in which they endure difficulties and overcome trauma thanks to their own efforts and to the support of others. They describe the specific decisions they made to survive and achieve their goals. Articles and films about them ignore their agency and portray them as helpless victims at the mercy of fate until they were ‘discovered’ by the international community and eventually brought to America.

Life in the USA has been a struggle. Some have now graduated from college but accessing education has not been as easy as many had hoped. Resettlement agencies and church groups offering support concluded that many were too old to complete high school education. Forced into low-paid menial employment many struggle to pay their bills, complete high school and send financial support back to relatives in Sudan or still languishing in Kakuma.

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1. www.lostboysofsudan.com
2. www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9785295/site/newsweek
4. www.lostboysfilm.com