

## Images from Darfur to haunt city streets

**The Constitution Center will confront passersby with genocidal horrors against a backdrop of human rights.**



HELENE CAUX

In an exhibit photo, refugee women collect wood, a chore that exposes them to attack and rape by armed groups.

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Leslie Thomas

is curator of the upcoming "Darfur/Darfur" exhibit

at the National Constitution Center

Joseph M. Torsella

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As the sun sets on Philadelphia's historic district this evening, a series of stark and unsettling images will appear on three of the limestone walls of the National Constitution Center.

By the museum's entrance on Arch Street, on the wall where the U.S. Constitution's famous Preamble is engraved, portraits will be shown of those who live in one of the world's worst places, where the struggle against violence and deprivation has left even children staring at the future with sad, empty eyes.

On two adjacent walls along Sixth Street will be beamed photographs that narrate this living

hell: the systemic destruction of traditional homes and formerly strong families, as well of as livestock and entire villages, and the valiant if often futile efforts to help those who survive.

The exhibit is called "Darfur/Darfur," and there'll be no escaping it. It will assault passersby, follow the driver, haunt the pedestrian.

While "Darfur/Darfur" has already been displayed in more than a dozen places around the world, the Constitution Center is only the second in this country, and the third in the world, to host the exhibit outside, in what otherwise would be regarded as public space.

The genocide in the Darfur region of western Sudan, a genocide that has raged now for four years, is no ordinary story.

By some estimates, up to 450,000 people have died as government-backed militias have killed and raped its people and ravaged the countryside. An estimated 2.3 million Darfuris have fled their homes and communities, living in displaced-persons camps in Darfur or, increasingly, in neighboring Chad.

The eight photographers whose works appear in this exhibit - among them a former U.S. Marine - have chronicled the deteriorating humanitarian crisis for all to see. So have other brave journalists and advocates. Still, the Khartoum government resists all entreaties to stop the murder and destruction.

The Bush administration, Congress, and two secretaries of state have labeled Darfur a genocide. So have respected members of the international community.

Still, Sudan President Omar al-Bashir ignores the very words of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, approved by the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights and once signed by his own nation.

One might ask: What does Darfur have to do with the U.S. Constitution? Why is America's birthplace an appropriate setting for images of a faraway tragedy?

In our view, Darfur has everything to do with what was written more than two centuries ago here in Philadelphia.

More than a legal document, the Constitution is, in the words of Frederick Douglass, a "great liberty document" whose ultimate subject is human rights. Those rights were not extended equally and fairly at first, but over time - through perseverance and struggle - our nation's concept of "We the People" has grown broader, stronger, and deeper.

Genocide defies "We the People." Genocide seeks to obliterate the values on which our system of governance is based. Rather than accepting that all people are born with natural rights, chief among them the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," those who would wreak genocide declare instead that certain people have no rights at all. No right even to survive.

In Sudan, it is the Janjaweed militia that began slaughtering civilian Darfuris and dividing a formerly integrated region along ethnic lines. This is not exclusively an African phenomenon. Genocide has reared its ugly sword in Germany and Poland, Cambodia and Kosovo. It

respects no boundaries of race, religion, geography. It calls out the worst in human nature.

And it works best in the dark, when no one is looking.

"Darfur/Darfur" seeks to honor the values of the U.S. Constitution by bringing genocide into the light, to make it real and human, compelling, unavoidable, and yes, even solvable. It is our duty as citizens to help secure for others the same liberties that we in America have worked so hard to secure for ourselves.

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### **If You Go**

"Darfur/Darfur"

National Constitution Center, 525 Arch St.

July 24-30, 8:45 p.m. to midnight.

Free.

[www.constitutioncenter.org](http://www.constitutioncenter.org)

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