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Constitution Center facades display anguish of Darfur

The Associated Press

Published: July 25, 2007

PHILADELPHIA: Mothers with babies on their backs, men passing food rations to fellow refugees in makeshift tents and a young teen with haunting eyes toting a rifle are among the larger-than-life images of the conflict in Sudan's Darfur region on display nightly.

The photos, from the traveling exhibit Darfur/Darfur, are being projected at wall size on the exterior of the National Constitution Center through July 30. The exhibit is here on a tour of 24 U.S. cities in as many months.

Curator Leslie Thomas, 42, said Wednesday that the inspiration for the project came while she was up late comforting her newborn child and reading a column about the crisis in Darfur, where an estimated 200,000 people have been killed and around 2.5 million displaced.

"I looked at my baby, and it was so offensive to me that someone would kill a child for any reason and particularly just for being the ethnicity that he was," she said.

That reaction sent the career architect, with no previous experience as a curator, pursuing museums and photojournalists who shared her vision of moving the world to action by putting a human face to genocide.

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Center's facades.

Two segments present narratives of conflict, beginning with peaceful scenes of villagers gathering firewood, women carrying water in bright jugs on their heads and children taking lessons. The images gradually turn to images of huts aflame, bodies reduced to skeletons in the desert and, finally, photos of cramped life at UN refugee camps.

The final section consists of portraits of people from Darfur, "who look just like me or my neighbor," Thomas said. "If it's completely unacceptable for my neighbor to be slaughtered, why would it be OK for someone thousands of miles away?"

The Darfur conflict began in 2003 when rebels from ethnic African tribes rose up against the Arab-dominated central government. The government is accused of having responded with indiscriminate killings by unleashing the janjaweed militias of Arab nomads — blamed for the worst atrocities in Darfur. The U.S. has condemned the killing as a genocide, a charge the government denies.

"If you understand the Constitution as embodying the value of individuals born with pre-existing rights, then genocide is the pure opposite of that," said Joseph M. Torsella, president and CEO of the National Constitution Center. "It says that by who you are, you have none of those rights."

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