

## **Testimony of Thon Chol**

**Submitted to The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**On the Subject of “Refugees and IDPs in Sudan: The Crisis Continues”**

**September 30, 2010**

Good afternoon. I would like to thank Co-Chairmen McGovern and Wolf, my congresswoman, Donna Edwards, and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for inviting me to be with you here today. I am honored to share my testimony with you.

My name is Thon Chol and I was one of the Lost Boys who came to the United States in 2000. I was born in Jonglei State, Sudan. In 1987, when I was four years old, the National Islamic Front Government attacked my village. I remember a lot of shouting, screaming, houses burning and soldiers shooting people in my village. I ran for safety with other children from the village. Years later, I learned that my father, most of my siblings and all of my uncles and aunts were killed in this attack.

Soldiers of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army, SPLA, arrived to help me and the other children who had fled. They told us it was too dangerous to return to our village. The SPLA soldiers became our guides, divided us into 14 different groups of about 1,800 children each, and told us that they would take us to Ethiopia.

On the way to Ethiopia, I had limited food and water and no clothes. Many of us fell sick with malaria, measles, whooping cough and anemia. We faced attacks from lions, hyenas, jackals and local villagers. To avoid the hot sun and aerial bombings by the Sudanese Government, we traveled by night and rested during the day. I understood that the government was after me, but I didn’t understand why.

By the time we arrived to Ethiopia in late 1987, about half of the children in my group had died. In Ethiopia, the United Nation’s refugee agency, United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees, helped set up a refugee camp in Pignudo for us. There were a few girls in my section of the camp, but the majority were boys. They gave us sticks and we built housing structures with grass roofs.

We did not have much in the refugee camp. Many of the children played with toys made of tin cans. Camp officials provided us with malaria tablets and some kind of cough tablets, but I don’t remember them providing any other medicine. Although I was able to attend school, I did not have any school supplies. I had to use a stick on the dirt floor to practice writing. We washed our clothes and drank water from a river that ran through the camp. Some children drowned because they didn’t know how to swim or were eaten by crocodiles.

Despite all of what I had seen, I had faith in God that things would change. But it was not as easy for some of the others. The older kids struggled with the horrors of what had happened. They were also burdened with the responsibility of having to care for the younger children.

During my time in the Ethiopian refugee camp, members of the U.S. Congress came to visit us. I later learned that none other than Congressman Frank Wolf was a part of this delegation. Thank you for your continued support, Congressman Wolf!

In 1991, war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea and we had to return to Sudan. We arrived to Gilo, Ethiopia, but there was no food. Instead of facing starvation, some of us went back to the refugee camp to get food. Upon returning to the camp, many children were killed by rebels. Those of us that survived found food supplies and continued on Pochalla, Sudan.

By this time, the story of the Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan had spread around the world. The late Manute Bol, a Sudanese national who had become famous playing professional basketball in the United States, visited us in Pochalla. He helped us to survive by delivering food and other supplies.

The Sudanese military discovered our location in Pochalla and continued their attacks against us. We ran for safety toward the Kenyan border. UNHCR and Operation Lifeline Sudan picked us up and moved us to the Kakuma refugee camp in Northern Kenya.

I arrived at Kakuma in 1992 at the age of 11. Kakuma was a very large refugee camp, housing an estimated 85,000 refugees from Sudan, Congo, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda, Eritrea, Burundi, and Somalia. Only about half of the children in my group survived. The rest died of hunger and other war-related causes during our journey to Kenya.

Life in Kakuma was not easy. There were no trees, no food growing, and there was little rainfall. Once again, we had to build our own housing structures. Every two weeks, they would distribute basic food supplies: flour, oil, beans, lentils, and salt. We had to ration our food carefully because if you ate everything in just a few days, you had to wait until they distributed food again in order to eat. There were not enough clothes or educational supplies. We also were threatened by local Kenyans who would enter the camp to beat and kill the refugees.

There were, however, some bright spots. After years of walking barefooted, we finally had shoes! Although they were made of used tires (Mutu-kaliu), we at least had something to protect our feet. Also, the education we received was an improvement over the classes in the Ethiopian. It was during this time of my life that I started learning English.

We were allowed to leave the camp, but it was difficult if you did not have money. I was able to leave a few times because I had found work with the Lutheran World Federation as a pre-school teacher and with the Jesuit Refugee Services as a counselor.

In 2000, God blessed me with the opportunity to be resettled to the United States thanks to the work of the U.S. Government, UNHCR, and Lutheran Immigration Refugee Service (LIRS). I arrived to the country alone and was therefore classified as an Unaccompanied Refugee Minor. LIRS placed me with Bethany Christian Services, a foster care program in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I was treated with respect, dignity, care and love.

I arrived in the United States with only a small plastic bag, a textbook, an African dress to symbolize my heritage, and a T-shirt. The shoes I was wearing on my trip to the United States are actually now in a Grand Rapids museum. When I landed in Grand Rapids, staff from Bethany Christian Services and someone from Sudan were there to meet me at the airport. It helped having someone from Sudan there to help welcome me.

The URM program assigned me a caseworker who oversaw my general wellbeing by helping me school, going to the doctor, and attending assigned programs. I was initially placed with an American family, but it was hard to adjust to family life. I had been living on my own since I was four years old, so I wasn't used to having other people tell me what to do. Bethany Christian Services then moved me to a group home with other refugee youth.

Soon after, I changed homes again. A principal from my high school invited me to stay with him and his family. I was initially reluctant, but he convinced me to live with him and his family. This ended up being a very positive experience as I learned a lot from him and his family.

Transitioning to life in the United States was not easy. Growing up in Africa, I had never seen cold winters like this before. Other initial challenges were cultural differences, language barriers and educational gaps. However, with the assistance of friends, mentors and Bethany Christian Services, I became more comfortable living in the United States.

After I finished high school in 2001, I started Grand Rapids Community College and finished in 2004 with an Associates Degree. This was really a good experience. I received a lot of personal attention from teachers who helped me with typing, reading, writing and other basic skills to prepare me for college.

In 2006, I received my Bachelor's degree in Organizational Communication and in 2008 received a Master's degree in Social Work from Western Michigan University. In 2008, I interned for Senators Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow. I currently work for the Government of the District of Columbia and am considering pursuing a PhD program later in my life.

I attribute my personal accomplishments to the help of my American foster parents, the organizations that helped to feed me, bring me to the United States, clothe me and provide me with shelter. Equally important is the support I received from my friends, family, instructors, co-workers, and mentors. Without the support of community

members in Michigan, and all the organizations and individual I mentioned earlier, I would not be where I am today.

Not all were as lucky as me. My sister, Akuol Chol, is a widow residing in a refugee camp in Uganda with her children. Though I try to oversee her welfare from the United States, I am very worried for her safety and well-being. She, too, has been a victim of violence and has been in a refugee camp for years. I hope that she and her children will also be resettled to the United States so we can be together.

In my life, I have experienced trauma, conflict, war and injustices, but I am not angry. I have devoted my life to peaceful co-existence, love, and fairness. I remain in close contact with the Sudanese community trying to promote peace and progress.

As a result of what I have seen, I recommend that U.S. policy makers do the following:

### **Overseas**

1. Put more diplomatic pressure on Sudan and other conflict areas to resolve their differences peacefully and include input and recommendations from NGOs with experience working with refugees and displaced persons.
2. Assist refugees who voluntarily return to their countries with training programs on how to survive, grow crops, start micro-enterprises, etc. Non-profit organizations who work with refugees could help develop and implement these programs.
3. Provide better assistance to refugees in refugee camps, such as protection, food, shelter, health care, education, counseling/therapy and AIDS awareness programs.
4. Ensure fairness and transparency in the distribution of supplies to refugees, and closely monitor for corruption and theft.
5. Improve the cultural orientation given to refugees being admitted to the United States tailored to the origin of the refugees and to the state where the refugees are being resettled.
6. Conduct a thorough assessment of refugees being admitted to the United States to determine the services they will need to successfully rebuild their lives in the United States.
7. Create programs to enable refugees resettled to the United States to return to help their countries rebuild and to provide support to fellow refugees. Congressman Wolf introduced legislation on this issue a few years ago and this bill is a good example of how the U.S. government can empower refugees to be a part of the solution. A bill such as this should be reintroduced.

### **Domestic**

1. Provide more comprehensive services to resettled refugees, including mental health screening and support, job training, English language training, civic responsibilities, financial literacy, and time management. ("Hurry, hurry has no blessing" is a common African saying.)
2. Extend the eligibility period of services to refugees longer than the eight months that refugees currently receive.

3. Provide more emphasis on education to help refugees because without education in the United States, it is difficult for refugees to advance professionally.
4. Promote vocational training to leverage refugees' skills.
5. Create more specific kind of trainings to help empower refugee women.

Former UN High Commissioner for Refugees once said, "A lasting solution, the possibility to begin a new life, is the only dignified solution for the refugee himself."

Members of the Human Rights Commission, I want to remind you of the impact of your efforts:

- They bring salvation where there is desperation.
- They bring hope where there is despair.
- They bring progress where there is stagnation.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my story with you this afternoon and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

**God Bless!**