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Independent Appeal: One man's search for the lost slaves of Africa

BY PAUL VALLELY | Tuesday 12 December 2006

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When James Aguer was 20 the slave-masters raided his village in the south of Sudan. They seized many children and killed his mother when she refused to give up her little daughter. James and his siblings were lucky. They escaped and made a laborious journey north to a refugee camp near the capital, Khartoum.

That was 20 years ago, and James has spent the past two decades looking for the missing children, and thousands more taken since. This month he was honoured in London with an award by the charity Anti-Slavery International for tracking down and freeing 4,500 abductees. But yesterday he returned to Sudan where, as he said, "there are a further 35,000 children yet to be freed".

The civil war in the south of Sudan - between the predominantly Arab and Muslim government forces from the north and the black, largely Christian peoples of the south - ended last year. But its legacy persists, not least in the huge numbers of southerners who were seized by government militia and taken into slavery in Darfur and Kordofan in the north and west.

The largest number were from the Dinka tribe, of which James Aguer is a chief. The abductions continued unabated until 2002 when progress was made at peace talks to end the war.

For three years, James lived in the Khartoum shelter. Today, a broad man, six and a half feet tall, dressed in a grey suit and a smart tie, it seems impossible to imagine him in the camp where, as the months passed, he gradually pieced together information about those who had been kidnapped.

Reports came that the children were being forced to work for Arab families without pay. They slaved from sunrise to sunset, slept outdoors with the animals and ate leftovers. They were beaten and abused. The girls were raped or forced into marriage.

One night, James called a secret gathering in the camp to discuss



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what could be done. He and five other chiefs were mandated to act. "We set out for Kordofan and Darfur, disguised in long, white Arab gelabiahs," he said. The men sat in different coaches on the train so no one would suspect they were together.

"When we arrived, we went in different directions, each to a village where we knew Dinka children were held as slaves. We pretended they were looking for agricultural work.

"Whenever we saw a dark-skinned child tending goats or cows or fetching water near an Arab village, we asked the child their name, where they came from and what they was doing there. We also asked if the child knew of other Dinka children in the area."

Periodically, the men came together to pool what they had learnt, discovering far greater numbers of enslaved children than they had at first supposed. They had records of the names of 14,000 women and children abducted between 10 June 1989 and 1997. It was just the start. Then, once the information had been passed on, the men returned to the village and approached the Arab headman to demand that the Dinka children be freed.

Astonishingly, in many cases the local sheikh agreed. "An honourable leader would call the abductor before him, and issue instructions that the child should be allowed to go home. If the sheikh refused we appealed to the next highest figure in the local tribal hierarchy."

But many were not compliant. It was a dangerous enterprise. Three of the five chiefs were killed on the mission. "One was shot by the abductors, another was beaten to death with sticks, and the third died in cross-fire," James said in his matter-of-fact way. James himself has been jailed 33 times.

The turning point for the Dinka came in 1999 after 10 years of arduous work when the Sudanese government caved in to pressure from international organisations which included Anti-Slavery International, one of the three charities being supported in this year's Independent Christmas Appeal. Khartoum set up a Committee for Eradication of the Abduction of Women and Children (CEAWC) and invited Dinka representatives, including James Aguer, to serve on it.

"It has been an effective body," he said, "but there is still much to do. We think there are still about 15,000 children and women who were abducted, and 20,000 more who were born into slavery of women who were kidnapped."

The treatment of the Dinka over the past two decades holds interesting parallels with that of the people of Darfur, another black ethnic group the Khartoum government seems bent on subduing. The tactics - using militias to burn and plunder villages, steal cattle, rape women and kill swaths of innocent people - are remarkably similar. But the lesson that James Aguer teaches is instructive, and encouraging. It is that the government in Khartoum is susceptible to international pressure; Anti-Slavery International campaigned for 10 years before the



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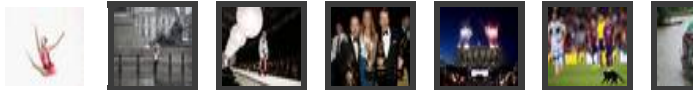
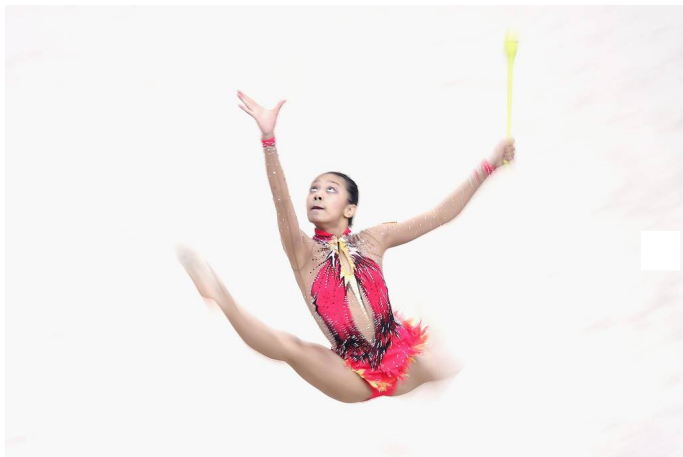
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