

Lost boys: Sudanese refugees in limbo

by [Ashley Makar](#) in the [February 20, 2007](#) issue

A handful of the “lost boys of Sudan”—the 26,000 children who fled civil war on foot—are on the big screen endearing themselves to American audiences. Four thousand were delivered from a United Nations refugee camp to various communities in the U.S. in 2001. A few of them are the subjects of a just-released National Geographic documentary, *God Grew Tired of Us*.

One of the boys—now a man—tells the story of his exodus through Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya to the U.S. and work in a factory, and finally to school at Syracuse University. But this complicated and rough redemption will not happen for most of the refugees.

The airlift was a one-time opportunity, an operation that cannot be repeated in the current state of the international refugee regime. Now that the southern Sudanese war is declared over, the UN has shifted its focus for Sudanese asylum seekers from resettlement to repatriation; in addition, the U.S. is accepting fewer refugees since 9/11. This convergence of policies leaves millions of Sudanese at an impasse—they are trapped between beloved home villages and inhospitable African cities, while their hope dwindles.

Outside All Saints Cathedral in Cairo, Gabriel Kuol shows me his vital documents in a transparent folder. There is a yellow paper rectangle the size of an index card. In the left corner is a stamp noting that he has permission for temporary residence in Egypt; in the right corner is a passport-sized head shot stapled and stamped by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. In the photo, the word “REFUGEES” appears over his right shoulder like a banner. He looks like a cross between a convict and a schoolboy—mouth rigid, face full to the camera, eyes wide open as if he won’t ever stop looking at you.

Another photo is safety-pinned to his application. Underneath, typed words create an autobiography—“Gabriel Kuol, born in the Dinka tribe; mother drowned in river

Nile; plane bombarded camp; we ran; they started shooting; father killed; they found me under the tree; took me to Emarat; worked in the house daily, Blue Nile fields on Fridays, sleeping outside on the floor, eating food remainders, beaten with water hoses, slap, irritation, no honor. 1983; left home country due to security circumstances, repeated air invasions; distributed to the leaders of the army; compulsory residence, Khartoum; work with no salary, savagery, hard treatment, force, violence; no human.” The words make a case—showing a well-founded fear of torture, enslavement and forced military recruitment—to support his application for asylum. Then Gabriel’s closing words: “Now I am in your hands.”

There is one more photo. In it, Gabriel is wearing sunglasses and posing next to a monument that has “Out of Egypt I have called my Son” etched in bold print on plaster. Gabriel is squatting, posing as a hip-hop star, showing off the thick silver chain of his cross necklace. His thin arm is raised to the small monument, his left finger pointing to the word “out.”

The Out of Egypt sculpture stands in a courtyard between All Saints Cathedral and Refuge Egypt, an Episcopal ministry for displaced East Africans. For Sudanese asylum seekers, the church serves as a place to go. Over a million have come to Egypt, having heard by word of mouth, as Gabriel did: *God willing, the UN will help you*. Since the end of the southern Sudanese war, the Sudanese are not recognized as refugees by the UNHCR office in Cairo, yet thousands of refugees are making their way up the Nile. They receive yellow cards authorizing their residence in Egypt, renewable every six months, if the government is willing. Most live nine in three-room apartments. Most don’t find jobs, and are often stopped on the street by police.

After a Sudanese church service, Gabriel tells me his plan: he will go to university, then home to southern Sudan to start a school. He’ll be a leader like his hero John Garang (see “Homeward bound: The Dinka tribe in Sudan,” in the November 28, 2006, *Century*). Maybe he’ll take some acting classes in college and be like his favorite star, Will Smith. But he won’t have 10 girlfriends or drink in the church courtyard after dark as do a lot of the young southern Sudanese men in Cairo. They don’t know their responsibility to keep themselves, he says, for Sudan’s sake.

Gabriel is keeping his word. The day Garang died, Gabriel asked God, “Who are you going to send next for Sudan?” Now he’s trying to follow in Garang’s footsteps: to Uganda, to Cairo and—“God willing”—to America. After getting his education, he will

go home to struggle for his people.

Gabriel showed me a Cairo slum called Matariya, where many Sudanese live. In the living room of a crowded apartment, women and children are watching TV. The adults keep track of the death toll from Khartoum, where riots broke out after the death of Garang.

Gabriel's cousin Peter (his name has been changed) was stunned by the news. He closed himself in his room "to be alone with God" for two days and searched for encouragement in the Bible. He read from Exodus to Leviticus, then turned to Isaiah 14. (Garang had made reference to the passage during a speech in Cairo.) There, he says, he found a prophecy for the Dinka, a tall people coming, as Moses came, from a land divided by rivers. Peter has witnessed the prophecy coming true: "There is no country that has been forgotten like southern Sudan. The world will not rescue us. But the Bible talks about us. Isaiah described Jesus as a neglected one. At the end it is written that these people will have a place in the world."

After exhausting all educational opportunities in Ethiopia, Kenya and Zaire, Peter came to Cairo in June 2004, a week before Gabriel. They had lost track of each other in migration, and when they found each other at All Saints Cathedral, they were both in their 20s.

Like Gabriel, Peter went to the UNHCR and was given a yellow card and a case number. He was told that appointments for interviews to determine refugee status would be posted. For two years, he looked for his number-and-letter identity code on an information board. He never saw it.

Three thousand Sudanese asylum seekers staged a sit-in in 2005 outside the UNHCR Cairo office, rejecting offers of meager financial assistance for "voluntary repatriation" or "local integration." They were demanding an airlift to the West. After a three-month standoff, UNHCR called on the Egyptian government to intervene. Riot police appeared with water canons and beat the demonstrators with batons.

Afraid and exasperated, Peter left the country. The last Gabriel heard from his cousin was in a telephone call. Peter had crossed the Sinai on a bus from Cairo and bribed Egyptian border guards to let him pass. He was calling from inside an Israeli immigration prison.