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***A struggle for survival in 'genocide emergency'***

**Sudanese crisis topic of [TCNJ](#) discussion**

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**Special To The Times - EWING**

They heard the helicopters long before they saw them.

The old Soviet Hind gunships, their swishing black rotors and tan fuselages the only other colors against an otherwise sharp blue sky, descended toward the ground as villagers ran.

Grabbing children from their play along with any food they could carry, the unarmed villagers took to the desert as fast as they could as the gunships opened fire.

High-caliber machine-gun bullets tore their tiny homes apart, and did the same to anyone slow or unlucky enough to be caught in the line of attack. After a strafing run, the helicopters banked, turned back toward the village, and launched their rockets.

This is Sudan. This is Darfur. This is genocide in modern times.

The Sudanese crisis was the topic of a recent gathering held by activist and campus groups at The College of New Jersey. Students gathered in Forcina Hall to listen to stories from what the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council has declared a "genocide emergency."

Hosted by the [Bonner Center](#) for Civic and Community Engagement, the [Bonner Scholars](#), Kidsbridge Children's Museum, Lutheran Social Ministries and [TCNJ's](#) Alpha Phi Omega Service fraternity, the evening began with a film produced by the Memorial Council titled "Witnessing Darfur."

It included an appearance by one of Sudan's "Lost Boys" — youths whose lives were disrupted by violence.

In the film, eyewitnesses spoke of what they encountered in Darfur, the western region of Sudan that borders Chad. Former U.S. Marine Capt. Brian Steidle, in Darfur assisting the small African Union peacekeeping force struggling to restore order there, spoke about the makeshift refugee camps where some of the nearly 2 million people displaced from their homes due to the violence now live.

"It looks like a trash dump," he said as a photograph of the encampment was displayed on the screen. "But each one of those clumps is actually a hut."

For much of the past half-century, the eastern African nation of Sudan has been embroiled in internal violence and famine. The country's second civil war began in 1983, lasting 21 years.

As the war was winding down, rebels in the Darfur region launched successful attacks against government troops. To fight them, the government turned to an Arab militia group known as the Janjaweed. In 2003, the Janjaweed began targeting non-Arab villages in the region, leading many to accuse the militia of genocide.

According to eyewitnesses and survivors, Steidle, and various aid organizations, the Janjaweed has murdered thousands of civilians, its members rape the women and burn the food stores of villages that they take over, and helicopter attacks decimate villages.

Though he was not in Darfur during the current crisis, David Thon knows what it is like to have his life torn apart by violence.

Thon was living in the Bor region of southern Sudan when the second civil war broke out. When Thon was 7 years old, he told the audience at [TCNJ](#), he stayed outside the village with other boys overnight to watch the family's small livestock herd.

"And that night, when the village was attacked, was the last night I saw my family," he said.

The men were murdered. The women and girls were taken into captivity. His village was destroyed, and Thon and the boys with him were alone. They began their trek across the desert, looking for safety.

"After more than 30 days of walking barefoot, we surprisingly made our way to Ethiopia," Thon said.

"I was lucky. I was able to make it across the Sudan-Kenya border. And I made my way to a refugee camp in Kenya," he said.

Through a resettlement program, Thon was able to come to America with other Lost Boys and find a new home in an unfamiliar nation.

"I had to learn a new language. I had to find my way in a country that was alien to me," he said. "I had to learn to ride a bus to work."

Thon believes that despite the fact that major countries such as the United States have failed to significantly dedicate themselves to ending the genocide in Darfur, change is possible.

"I think there's still hope," he told the students, urging the audience to do "anything you can do, no matter how small."

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