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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Tortured, but Not Silenced

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

An early test of the next president's moral courage will come as he decides how to engage two Sudanese people named Bashir.

One is President Omar al-Bashir, who faces indictment for genocide by the International Criminal Court. The other is Dr. Halima Bashir, a young Darfuri woman whom the Sudanese authorities have tried to silence by beatings and gang-rape.

In 10 days, Halima's extraordinary memoir will be published in the United States, at considerable risk to herself. She writes in "Tears of the Desert" of growing up in a placid village in rural Darfur, of her wonder at seeing white people for the first time, of her brilliant performance in school.

Eventually Halima became a doctor, just as the genocide against black African tribes like her own began in 2003. Halima soon found herself treating heartbreaking cases, like that of a 6-year-old boy who suffered horrendous burns when the state-sponsored janjaweed militia threw him into a burning hut.

One day she gave an interview in which she delicately hinted that the Darfur reality was more complicated than the Sudanese government version. The authorities detained her, threatened her, warned her to keep silent and transferred her to a remote clinic where there were no journalists around to interview her.

Then the janjaweed attacked a girls' school near Halima's new clinic and raped dozens of the girls, aged 7 to 13. The first patient Halima tended to was 8 years old. Her face was bashed in and her insides torn apart. The girl was emitting a haunting sound: "a keening, empty wail kept coming from somewhere deep within her throat — over and over again," she recalls in the book.

Sudan's government dispatches rapists the way other governments dispatch the police, the better to terrorize black African tribes and break their spirit. What sometimes isn't noted is that many young Darfuri girls undergo an extreme form of genital cutting called infibulation, in which the vagina is stitched closed until marriage; that makes such rapes of schoolgirls particularly violent and bloody, increasing the risk of AIDS transmission.

Halima found herself treating the girls with tears streaming down her own face. All she had to offer the girls for their pain was half a pill each of acetaminophen: "At no stage in my years of study had I been taught how to deal with 8-year-old victims of gang rape in a rural clinic

without enough sutures to go around.”

Soon afterward, two United Nations officials showed up at the clinic to gather information about the attack. Halima told them the truth.

A few days later, the secret police kidnapped her. “You speak to the foreigners!” one man screamed at her. They told her that she had talked of rape but knew nothing about it — yet. For days they beat her, gang-raped her, cut her with knives, burned her with cigarettes, mocked her with racial epithets. One told her, “Now you know what rape is, you black dog.”

Upon her release, a shattered Halima fled back to her native village, but it was soon attacked and burned — and her beloved father killed. Halima still doesn’t know what happened to her mother or brothers. Eventually she made her way to Britain, where she is seeking asylum, and even there Sudanese agents are trying to track her whereabouts.

It is difficult to verify some of Halima’s story, and she has modified her own name and some place names to protect family members from retribution. But what can be checked out does check out and suggests no exaggeration.

For example, Halima says in her book that she does not know how many girls were raped at the school but that 40 were brought to the clinic. I’ve found independent accounts of the same attack that describe as many as 110 girls and teachers raped and dozens more kidnapped; the United Nations also has photos of the school after the attack.

I asked Halima if she regrets telling the U.N. officials about the rape of the schoolgirls, considering what it cost her. She sighed and said no.

“What happened to me happened to so many other Darfur women,” she said. “If I didn’t tell, all the other people don’t get the chance — and I have the chance. I am a well-educated woman, so I can speak up and send a message to the world.”

Halima’s bravery contrasts with the world’s fecklessness and failures on Darfur. She is applying for a travel document and a visa to come to the United States to talk about her book, but it seems unlikely that they will arrive in time for its release. I hope President Bush accelerates the process and invites her to the White House, to show the world which of the two Bashirs America stands behind.

I invite you to comment on this column on my blog, www.nytimes.com/ontheground, and join me on Facebook at www.facebook.com/kristof.

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