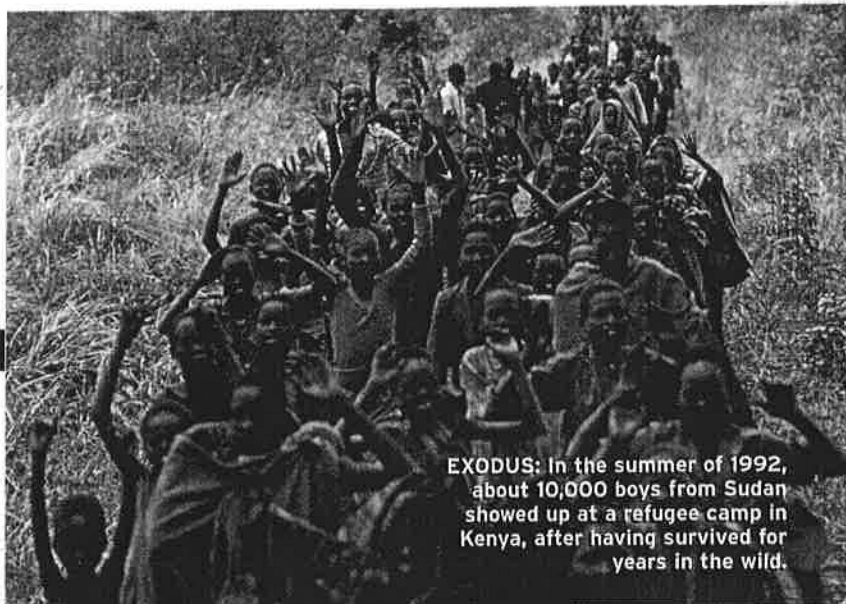
The LOST BOYS



EXODUS: In the summer of 1992, about 10,000 boys from Sudan showed up at a refugee camp in Kenya, after having survived for years in the wild.

These young African refugees survived lions, crocodiles, and starvation. Now they're starting life over in America. **BY SARA CORBETT**

One evening in late January, Peter Dut, 21, leads his two teenage brothers through the brightly lit corridors of the Minneapolis airport, trying to mask his confusion. Two days earlier, the brothers, refugees from Africa, had encountered their first light switch and their first set of stairs. An aid worker in Nairobi had demonstrated the flush toilet to them—also the seat belt, the shoelace, the fork. And now they find themselves alone in Minneapolis, three bone-thin African boys confronted by a swirling river of white faces and rolling suitcases.

Finally, a traveling businessman recognizes their uncertainty. "Where are you flying to?" he asks kindly, and the eldest brother tells him in halting, bookish English. A few days earlier, they left a small mud hut in a blistering-hot Kenyan refugee camp, where they had lived as orphans for nine years after walking for hundreds of miles across Sudan. They are now headed to a new home in the U.S.A. "Where?" the man asks in disbelief when Peter Dut says the city's name. "Fargo? North Dakota? You gotta be kidding me. It's too cold there. You'll never survive it!"

And then he laughs. Peter Dut has no idea why.

In the meantime, the temperature in Fargo has dropped to 15 below. The boys tell me that, until now, all they have ever known about cold is what they felt grasping a bottle of frozen water. An aid worker handed it to them one day during a "cultural orientation" session at the Kakuma Refugee Camp, a place where the temperature hovers around 100 degrees.

Peter Dut and his two brothers belong to an unusual group of refugees referred to by aid organizations as the Lost Boys of Sudan, a group of roughly 10,000 boys who arrived in Kenya in 1992 seeking refuge from their country's fractious civil war. The fighting pits a northern Islamic government against rebels in the south who practice Christianity and tribal religions *(see "Africa's Longest War," page 21)*.

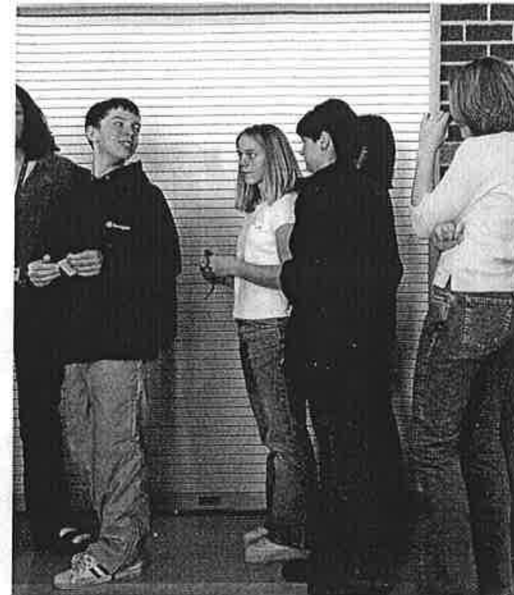
The Lost Boys were named after Peter Pan's posse of orphans. According to U.S. State Department estimates, some 17,000 boys were separated from their families and fled southern Sudan in an exodus of biblical proportions

FROM LEFT: JEFF RIEDEL; DEREK HUDSON/SYGMA

after fighting intensified in 1987. They arrived in throngs, homeless and parentless, having trekked about 1,000 miles, from Sudan to Ethiopia, back to Sudan, and finally to Kenya. The majority of the boys belonged to the Dinka or Nuer tribes, and most were then between the ages of 8 and 18. (Most of the boys don't know for sure how old they are; aid workers assigned them approximate ages after they arrived in 1992.)

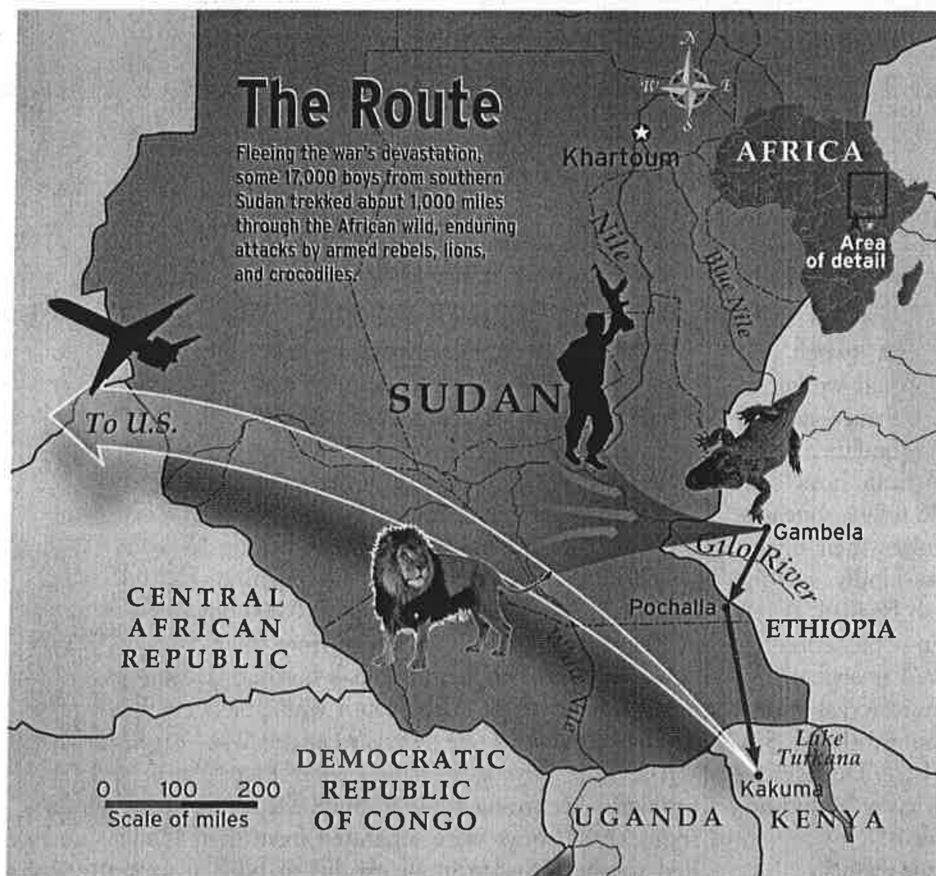
Along the way, the boys endured attacks from the northern army and marauding bandits, as well as lions who preyed on the slowest and weakest among them. Many died from starvation or thirst. Others drowned or were eaten by crocodiles as they tried to cross a swollen Ethiopian river. By the time the Lost Boys reached the Kakuma Refugee Camp, their numbers had been cut nearly in half.

Now, after nine years of subsisting on rationed corn mush and lentils and living largely ungoverned by adults, the Lost Boys of Sudan are coming to America. In 1999, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which handles refugee cases around the world, and the U.S. government agreed to send 3,600 of the boys to the U.S.—since going back to Sudan was out of the question. About 500 of the Lost Boys still under the age of 18 will be living in apartments or foster homes across the U.S. by the end of this year. The boys will start school at a grade level normal for their age, thanks to a tough English-language program at their refugee camp. The remaining 3,100 Lost Boys will be resettled as adults. After five years, each boy will be eligible for citizenship, provided he has turned 21.



JEFF RIEDEL

"Excuse me," says Peter. "Can you tell me, please, is it now night

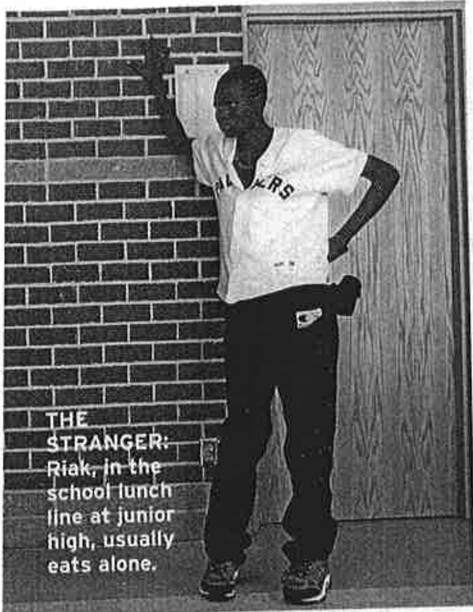


NIGHTTIME IN AMERICA?

On the night that I stand waiting for Peter Dut and his brothers to land in Fargo, tendrils of snow are snaking across the tarmac. The three boys file through the gate without money or coats or luggage beyond their small backpacks. The younger brothers, Maduk, 17, and Riak, 15, appear petrified. As a social worker passes out coats, Peter Dut studies the black night through the airport window. "Excuse me," he says, worriedly. "Can you tell me, please, is it now night or day?"

This is a stove burner. This is a can opener. This is a brush for your teeth. The new things come in a tumble. The brothers' home is a sparsely furnished, two-bedroom apartment in a complex on Fargo's south side. Rent is $445 a month. It has been stocked with donations from area churches and businesses: toothpaste, bread, beans, bananas.

A caseworker empties a garbage bag full of donated clothing, which looks to have come straight from the closet of an elderly man. I know how lucky the boys are: The State Department estimates that war, famine, and disease in southern Sudan have killed more than 2 million people and displaced another 4 million. Still I cringe to think of the boys showing up for school in these clothes.



THE STRANGER: Riak, in the school lunch line at junior high, usually eats alone.

ɔr day?"

The next day, when I return to the apartment at noon, the boys have been up since 5 and are terribly hungry. "What about your food?" I ask, gesturing to the bread and bananas and the box of cereal sitting on the counter.

Peter grins sheepishly. I suddenly realize that the boys, in a lifetime of cooking maize and beans over a fire pit, have never opened a box. I am placed in the role of teacher. And so begins an opening spree. We open potato chips. We open a can of beans. We untwist the tie on the bagged loaf of bread. Soon, the boys are seated and eating a hot meal.

LIVING ON LEAVES AND BERRIES

The three brothers have come a long way since they fled their village in Sudan with their parents and three sisters—all of whom were later killed by Sudanese Army soldiers. The Lost Boys first survived a 6- to 10-week walk to Ethiopia, often subsisting on leaves and berries and the occasional boon of a warthog carcass. Some boys staved off dehydration by drinking their own urine. Many fell behind; some were devoured by lions or trampled by buffalo.

The Lost Boys lived for three years in Ethiopia, in UN-supported camps, before they were forced back into Sudan by a new Ethiopian government no longer sympathetic to their plight. Somehow, more than 10,000 of the boys miraculously trailed into Kenya's UN camps in the summer of 1992—as Sudanese government planes bombed the rear of their procession.

For the Lost Boys, then, a new life in America might easily seem to be the answer to every dream. But the real world has been more complicated than that. Within weeks of arriving, Riak is placed in a local junior high; Maduk starts high school classes; and Peter begins adult-education classes.

REFUGEE BLUES

Five weeks later, Riak listens quietly through a lesson on Elizabethan history at school, all but ignored by white students around him.

Nearby at Fargo South High School, Maduk is frequently alone as well, copying passages from his geography textbook, trying not to look at the short skirts worn by many of the girls.

Peter Dut worries about money. The three brothers say they receive just $107 in food stamps each month and spend most of their $510 monthly cash assistance on rent and utilities.

Resettlement workers say the brothers are just undergoing the normal transition. Scott Burtsfield, who coordinates resettlement efforts in Fargo through Lutheran Social Services, says: "The first three months are always the toughest. It really does get better."

The Lost Boys can only hope so; they have few other options. A return to southern Sudan could be fatal. "There is nothing left for the Lost Boys to go home to—it's a war zone," says Mary Anne Fitzgerald, a Nairobi-based relief consultant.

Some Sudanese elders have criticized sending boys to the U.S. They worry their children will lose their African identity. One afternoon, an 18-year-old Lost Boy translated a part of a tape an elder had sent along with many boys: "He is saying: 'Don't drink. Don't smoke. Don't kill. Go to school every day, and remember, America is not your home.'"

But if adjustment is hard, the boys also experience consoling moments.

One of these comes on a quiet Friday night last winter. As the boys make a dinner of rice and lentils, Peter changes into an African outfit, a finely woven green tunic, with a skullcap to match, bought with precious food rations at Kakuma.

Just then, the doorbell rings unexpectedly. And out of the cold tumble four Sudanese boys—all of whom have resettled as refugees over the last several years. I watch one, an 18-year-old named Sunday, wrap his arms encouragingly around Peter Dut.

"It's a hard life here," Sunday whispers to the older boy, "but it's a free life, too." ■

Africa's Longest War

In Sudan, the numbers tell a hideous story: 2 million dead, 4 million displaced, and thousands forced into slavery. Sudan is home to Africa's longest-running civil war and the world's most lethal one. More have died there than in Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Algeria combined.

The civil war first erupted in 1955 as a battle between the country's predominantly Arab, Muslim north and the black African south, which sought autonomy. The southerners, mostly Christians and followers of tribal religions, felt they had been discriminated against and long denied their fair share of services.

Over the years, the war has mushroomed into a complex struggle between the Islamic fundamentalist government, which wants to impose Islamic law on the entire nation, and an assortment of rebel groups, some of whom are fighting for independence.

"Sudan is diverse ethnically, culturally, and religiously," says Ali Dinar of the African Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania. "The problem is that the government has monolithic views of how things will be."

But the war is also a battle for southern Sudan's undeveloped resources—oil fields and arable land. Because the south has the resources, Sudan is unlikely to ever let the region go. Some say the only hope is for an outside power to mediate, but so far none has stepped forward. —*Patricia Smith*

HOW YOU CAN HELP: More Info on refugees at UPFRONT ONLINE.

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