

My Life's Story – by Chris Garang
Written winter of 2006

My name is Chris Garang. I was born in 1983 in Wau, Akon village. I was seven years old when the Arab Muslim army from the northern part of Sudan attacked our village in southern Sudan. It is a night that I will never forget. My parents, my brother and I ate dinner and went to bed. At midnight I heard noises of gunshots, people screaming, cows mooing, goat and sheep bleating. I woke up in fear. My eyes were wide open. I saw a big flame on the side of our house burning and coming toward me. I jumped up like a gazelle and started running. My parents, brother and I were separated because we all just ran for our lives. I ran until my heart started aching and my legs could carry me no farther. It was still dark. I looked around, but no one was there except some insects, snakes and squirrels running around me.

I was in the middle of the forest. I was afraid of being eaten by lions, hyena or leopards. I decided to climb up in a tree. I was in the tree until the sun was in the middle of the sky. Fortunately, six people came walking under my tree. I started screaming at the top of my lungs out of fear because I thought that they saw me and they might kill me. They ran away, but they came back under the tree and looked up. They spoke to me in the Dinka language, my native language. One man said, "We are Monyueng," which means we are Dinka people, come down. I did what they said. They told me that some people were caught by the Arabs and tied on horses and some were killed. The men told me that we have to run. We started walking where the sun rises. We met a large number of people who were also affected by the same Arab Muslims in the villages. The men and I joined the group and started walking. During the day we walked until the sun set. When it was dark we sat in open areas. The older boys sat on the outside surrounding the younger boys. The older boys talked in deep voices to pretend as if they were strong men to scare the wild animals away from us. The younger boys in the circle would line up to spin sticks to make the fire.

We ate leaves from trees, grass, fruit from the trees, dead animal meat and dead birds. We ate whatever we could find. When the birds started making noise in the early morning there was a cow horn that one boy would blow to wake up the group. Some boys never got up and some woke up but couldn't walk. I was walking barefoot and my feet were swollen, covered with blisters. They were like birthday balloons. I was in a stage of denying death. I tiptoed, walked on the edge of my feet or on my heels because I didn't want to remain behind and get jumped on by a lion or get my eyes taken out by vultures. The vultures rained down every time we started walking. It was the most scaring thing I have ever seen in my life...vultures taking the boys eyes out and lions breaking their necks. The time we were walking we got bombed by the Islamic government. We were told that if you were wearing red and white clothes that you have to take them off because the pilots could see them and then bomb the people.

I made it to Panyido Refugee Camp in Ethiopia after three months of walking. I was taken in by the Red Cross. They let me stay in a small house. I saw them mix sugar and salt into water and then they gave it to me to drink. After that they gave me some clothes, pencils and notebooks. They took me to the minors group where my age mates were living. It was hard in the minor group because we had to make our own slum houses. They put five boys in one room in the house that we built. The UNICEF provided us with food and clothes.

When the Ethiopian civil war broke out in 1991 they told us that they did not want any Sudanese refugees in their country. We were like fish out of water. The caretaker told us to be ready to run at anytime. At day light, the Ethiopian army came with tanks and machine guns, shooting at us randomly. Four friends and I were making a soccer ball out of socks inside our house when this happened. We ran out from our hut and ran toward the river. The bullets were flying like bees on my ears. There was not much we could do – just run to the river away from the bullets. The river Gillo was a running river. Many animals such as crocodile, hippos and snakes lived in this river. It also contained rocks and trees. We had no choice but to cross the river because they were shooting at us forcing us to the river. I was running along the side of the river, trying to avoid the crowd. I watched some of my friends jump in the river and never surface again. Many were shot and killed on the edge. Not everyone knew how to swim so they drowned. Others were eaten by hippopotamus or crocodile. I jumped in the river and let myself go with the current. I was lucky to cross the river without any injuries.

The minors and I who crossed the river alive started running back to Sudan. We came to Pachala, Sudan. Pachala was a very dirty, muddy town. I got chiggers all over my feet. I couldn't walk but I had no choice. We were getting bombed day and night by the Islamic government. We left Pachala and walked toward the town called Kapoeta. I was behind the group because of the chiggers on my feet plus guinea worm showed up on my left knee. Fifteen boys and I were walking and we came across four Taposa men. (They are the people of that area.) Two of them had guns. They told us that we were lost from our group so they said they would help us catch up with the group. The boys and I accepted their help to show us the way because we were tired, hungry, thirsty and sick. The help they offered was a trick and a lie. They led us to a town called Torit which was occupied by Islamic troops. They tied our hands and handed us over to the army patrol men. They told the army patrol men that we were part of the rebels who were fighting against them. They were given money in front of us for bringing us in.

My friend and I were put in jail. The jail was a bunker that they had dug for prisoners. Every morning my friend and I were taken out and told to run into a cold water pond with our hands tied. Then they would give us fifteen lashes. After that they gave us raw cassava (potatoes) and sorgum (millet) to eat. In about a week they started taking us out to do the high ranking men's laundry and iron their clothes. One of the army men from the Nuba Mountains came and told my friend, Bol and I that we were going to be killed in two days. But he said that it was his turn to watch that night – meaning we would have a chance to get away. My feet were still swollen from the chiggers. He said he would help us by leading us out at night. He untied us, gave us some water and led us to the stream close by. He left with us because if he remained at the prison he would be killed for letting us escape. We ran for the whole night. I was not thinking about my feet being swollen or the pain. We spent nine days walking to Kapota. A day before we reached Kapota we were ambushed by some of the Taposa people. They captured five boys, killed seven boys including the man who helped us escape from jail. Bol, Mawien and I ran. We reached Kapota after a days walk. I was peeing blood when I came to Kapota. I was taken to a mobile clinic that was set up by the Red Cross. They gave me some capsules to take for the blood in my urine.

The life in Kapota was rougher than we thought it would be. My friend Mawien died of dehydration from chronic diarrhea. We got bombed six times a day. Kapota was captured by the SPLA – Sudan People Liberator Army from the Islamic government troops. We met some of our friends in Kapota and we told them what had happened to us. They thought that we had died long ago. The SPLA put every boy in boot camp for training. Unfortunately, the Islamic troops came with tanks and planes and started bombing us. We ran again. Bol and I ran to Natimaga, then to Narus and finally to Lockichoggio. The U.N. had set up a camp for us because Kenya wouldn't let us into their country unless the U.N. would buy land for us to live on. We were still getting bombed in Lockichoggio because it is still in Sudan. We moved to Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya because the bombing never ceased and the U.N. knew they had to buy the land for our safety.

We were put in minor groups, numbered one to thirty-seven. In Kakuma life was a little safer but there was nothing to eat. I got a cup of corn for fifteen days. If you finished that cup of corn in 2 days then you would spend the rest of the thirteen days without eating anything except the dirt from the ground and leaves from the trees. The U.N. built a school for us but many kids were not going to school because they were more concerned with finding food to stop their hunger. In 1997 I ate beef for the first time since I came to the Kenyan Kakuma refugee camp in 1992. After I ate the beef, I had the worst diarrhea ever. I was going to the bathroom every minute. I started defecating water diarrhea, blood diarrhea and then fatt stools.

At that time I was unable to identify anybody. I was going to die. There was no clinic in the camp. My friend Bol came with a cup of whiskey and told me to drink it. The whiskey made me pass out for three days. When I woke up my diarrhea had stopped. Bol saved my life. I would have died if the diarrhea had continued. When I was well again I began going to school in Kakuma. I had to work hard in school to catch up and learn English. The U.N. chose me to go to the United States to get out of Sudan. On April 3, 2001 I arrived in the United States to start my new life.