

Scars From Sudan's Wars Run Deep

A Pinellas woman survived the horrors many there suffer today.

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LARGO — Christina Arcangelo remembers the day Janjaweed militia came to her village in southern Sudan and changed her life.

That was 29 years ago, but there are moments when it seems like yesterday.

In broken English, Arcangelo tells a reporter how her mother ran for safety with Christina on her back. She said they hid in a deep hole prepared just for that purpose and waited for the danger to pass.

"I'm like 14 years [old], you go in the deep [hole], you stay in the deep three days, no food, no nothing," Arcangelo said.

By the time they emerged, Arcangelo said, the Janjaweed raiders had plundered their village, raped countless women, and murdered her friends and relatives without regard to age or gender.

Some victims of the carnage, she said, faced a difficult choice: death by machine gun or forced drowning in a nearby river.

"My cousin, he die. My uncle, my two aunties, they die in the water — nothing to do. Oh God," she says, weeping. "Oh Jesus."

Arcangelo credits faith with helping her survive the terror. "I put God in my head and in my heart," she said.

The atrocities described by Arcangelo happened during the second of two civil wars that have ravaged Sudan since the 1950s.



Christina Arcangelo is still recovering from her abuse at the hands of militiamen in Sudan 29 years ago.

In Arcangelo's case, social workers say the civil conflict pitted the Islamic majority of Arab descent in the north against the people in her southern village who were mostly Christian and had different ethnic roots than the government-backed Janjaweed militia.

Earlier this month the International Criminal Court issued an indictment and arrest warrant for Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir that accuses him of orchestrating the most recent spate of mass murder, rape and torture in his country.

He is the first head of state to face such an indictment, but remains defiantly in power and denies complicity in the bloodshed.

The United Nations and various human rights organizations estimate that between 2 million and 4 million Sudanese have died in the conflict. It is estimated 5,000 are dying each month from the continuing violence, pestilence and starvation.

Even though she safely resettled in Pinellas County seven years ago, Arcangelo has relatives in Sudan and is not comfortable talking about al-Bashir except to say, "he only cares about himself, not for anybody."

Arcangelo, 43, is one of three Sudanese refugees receiving services from the Florida Center for Survivors of Torture, an organization that operates under the auspices of Gulf Coast Jewish Family Services Inc., a nonprofit group based in Clearwater that receives funding from Washington and the United Nations.

The State of Florida provided services to 127 Sudanese refugees last year, including 10 in Pinellas, 12 in Pasco and six in Hillsborough County.

Social workers with Jewish Family Services say Arcangelo qualifies for services as a torture victim because of what happened to her after her initial escape from her village, before her eventual flight by bus, boat and on foot to a refugee camp in Egypt with her mother.

It is a time that's too bitter and humiliating for her to speak about publicly, at least not yet. She and her mother, who is now in her 70s, receive mental health treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder.

Social workers say a Muslim military leader who was part of the village raids abducted Arcangelo and held her as his personal captive in his family compound for 12 years.

What happened during that period of enslavement is something Arcangelo plans to share some day with her two American-born daughters, ages 3 and 7. Right now the pain is still too fresh, the children are too young, and she's just not ready to speak about it.

She does, however, keep a reminder of that time in the modest apartment she shares with her mother, daughters and the husband she met in an Egyptian refugee camp.

On the wall of her living room, amid dozens of family photos, religious icons and African art, hang two leather bullwhips, made for animals but used on human beings who find themselves on the losing end of the continuing power struggle in Sudan.

Also on the wall, in a place of prominence, hangs a reminder of the Arcangelo family's present circumstance: still locked in poverty and dependent on social services, but free from physical oppression and servitude.

Her daughter Hamedra, 7, is studying patriotism with her first-grade classmates at Frontier Elementary School and has pieced together something she recites every morning in school.

The first thing that visitors see when they enter the Arcangelo home is the Pledge that ends: "...with liberty and justice for all."