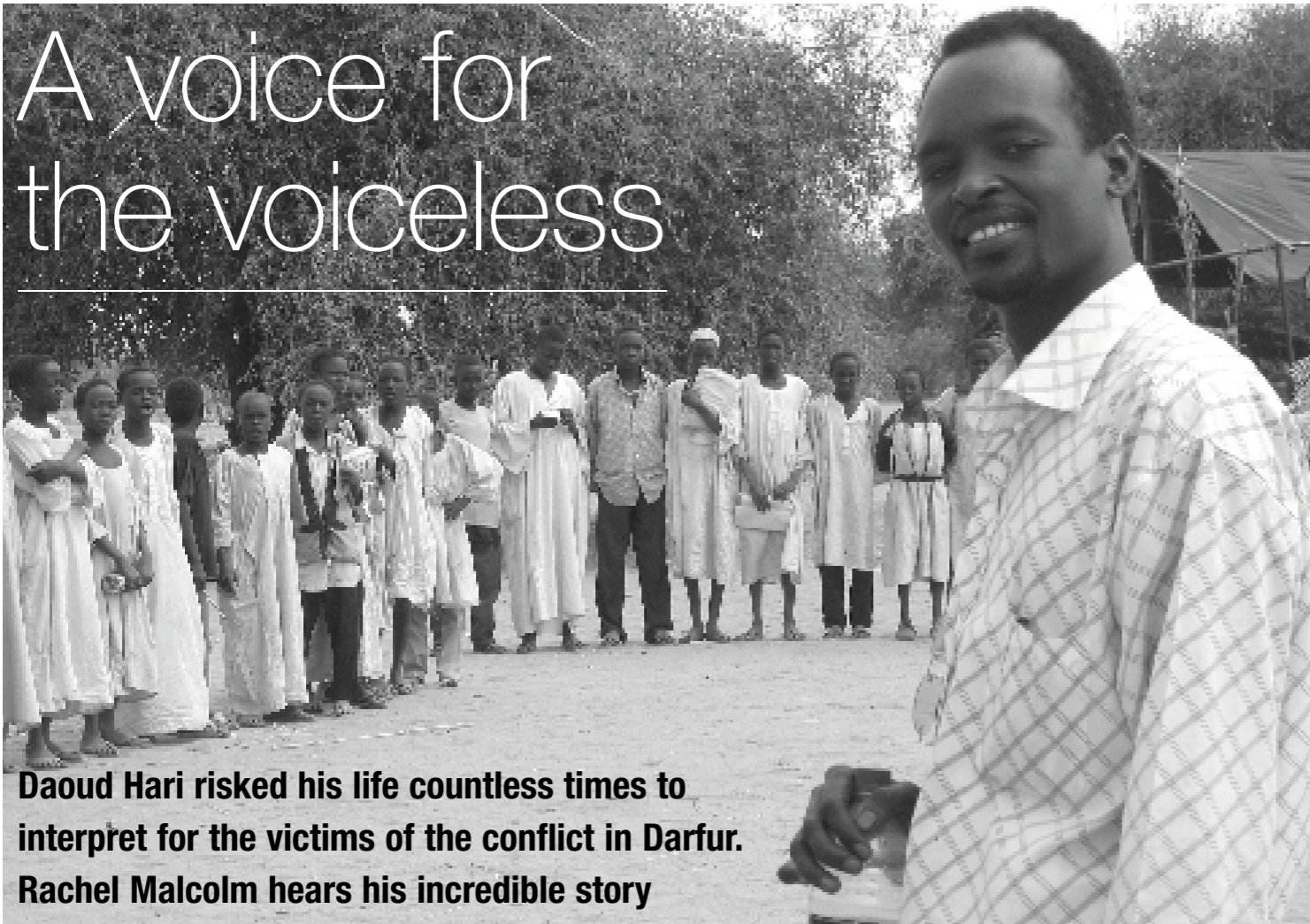


# A voice for the voiceless



**Daoud Hari risked his life countless times to interpret for the victims of the conflict in Darfur. Rachel Malcolm hears his incredible story**



Rachel Malcolm is the editor of *ITI Bulletin*.

Few of us have ever faced any real peril in our professional lives. But for Daoud Hari, mortal danger and unspeakable tragedy were part of the job description, as he acted as an interpreter and guide for western journalists reporting on the conflict in Darfur. Shaking hands with him in the library of a London hotel, it's hard to believe that the softly spoken, smartly dressed man in front of me is the same person who, along with an American journalist and their driver, was imprisoned, beaten, tortured and accused of spying by the Sudanese regime.

Along with more than two million other Darfuri tribespeople, Daoud Hari was driven from his homeland by the war that broke out in 2003. Brutally separated from his family – one brother was killed, and he still doesn't know the fate of his beloved sisters – Hari sought to use his language skills to help bring the conflict to the

attention of the wider world. He is a fluent speaker of Zaghawa, Arabic and English, and from 2003 to 2006 he led journalists from the BBC, *New York Times* and many other news organisations over the border into the killing fields of Darfur. They spent many months visiting burned-out villages, listening to and documenting the stories of shell-shocked survivors, in the hope that the wider world would act to prevent the horrific trail of rape, murder and destruction from continuing. Eventually, in August 2006, Daoud was captured, along with his Chadian driver, Ali, and Pulitzer Prize-winning US journalist Paul Salopek. After suffering beatings and torture at the hands of their jailers, the three were charged with espionage by the Sudanese government. More than a month later, after a campaign led by New Mexico Governor (and former US Presidential candidate) Bill Richardson

**'Everyone in Darfur is asking, "How is it that Darfur could become like this?"'**

and supported by Barack Obama, they were released. Daoud was later granted refugee status in the United States, where he wrote his memoir, *The Translator* (reviewed opposite). On a recent visit to London, he spoke to *ITI Bulletin*.  
**RM:** When did you first become aware of the war?  
**DH:** There were some conflicts between the tribes in Darfur when we were children, but the tribe leaders themselves used to solve them. We would play together, even with the Arab children [Daoud is from the black African Zaghawa tribe] at the same time. If people had a problem, we were just children, so no one cared about us. Children would never

be affected by the conflicts. But this conflict, which started in 2003, is different. Because of many policies that led to conflicts between tribes, and because of the power of the government, the children have been affected a lot. They have been burned and killed, they have lost their families, the girls have been raped. It shocks us. Everyone in Darfur is asking, 'How is it that Darfur could become like this?'

**RM:** Going back to your childhood, did you speak Arabic with the Arabic children you played with?

**DH:** When we were children, we couldn't speak Arabic and they didn't speak Zaghawa. But play is play, you don't need someone to translate for that (laughs). Camel is camel! It's very easy for children who know each other, whether you want to climb a tree, or jump... we had a children's language I guess. We shared the same lake, the same camels, the same trees, the same mountains. Talking doesn't matter. You can talk but you don't understand. We were like animals, but we understood each other, what we needed and what we meant.

**RM:** When you were working as an interpreter in Darfur, are there any cases that particularly affected you?

**DH:** Yes, many things affected me,

## THE TRANSLATOR BY DAOUD HARI

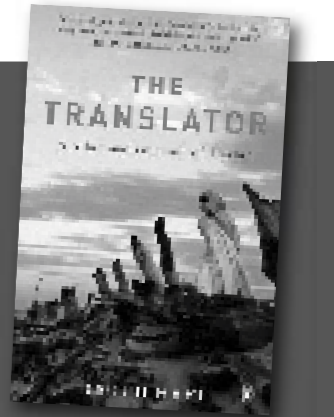
I can't be the only person who has felt overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the tragedy in Darfur, and unsure of what can really be done to help. Daoud Hari's memoir, although deeply moving and often tragic, is also suffused with the hope that, when ordinary people hear what is happening, they will act. It is certainly impossible to claim ignorance after reading it.

Daoud has made it his mission to bring Darfur to the world's attention, and it is for this that he risked his life, again and again, to take journalists to the heart of the story. As Nicholas D. Kristof, who worked with him in Darfur, later wrote in the *New York Times*,

'Interpreters and drivers are the secret to good international reporting, and they do much of the work, take most of the risks and get none of the credit.'

Indeed, Daoud is deeply understated about the level of bravery that is required to drive into the heart of a war zone.

'I had found my fate,' he says simply of his first assignment as an interpreter for a genocide investigator. He draws parallels between his life in Darfur and our lives in the west – not to contrast them, but to point out how much we have to unite us. 'My childhood was as full of happy adventures as yours,' he writes. 'While you probably had a bicycle and then a first



car, I had a camel.' Sadly, those happy adventures are no more for the children of Darfur – and this powerful book tells their tragic stories with deep compassion and a desperate urgency that cannot be ignored. (Viking, £8.99)

**'Here I am, there is Darfur, and here you are, and here is what you can do'**

which I wrote about and talked about in my book. But more important for me was that the journalists saw these many things. The children who had been training to take a gun and fight, who were used as a tool of war. How the girls as young as nine or ten years old had been raped. How the villages had been burned and the people killed. How the big missiles had been used, when they didn't need to use those missiles.

**RM:** Have you met any of the people who campaigned for your release from prison in Darfur?

**DH:** Yes, I have met Bill Richardson, Philip Cox [pictured overleaf], who wrote many letters, [US member of House of Representatives] Christopher Shays, and many other people, members of Congress, so many people!

**RM:** Are you still in touch with Paul Salopek?

**DH:** Yes, he is in Johannesburg right now, working for the *Chicago Tribune*. We email from time to time.

**RM:** Do you think you will be able to return to Darfur?

**DH:** If there is peace I can return to

Darfur. But I am concerned only about the two and a half million people who are refugees outside Darfur. The women and children must be able to return to their homes.

That's what I am concerned about, that's what I have to advocate through my book. For me, I can return when there is peace.

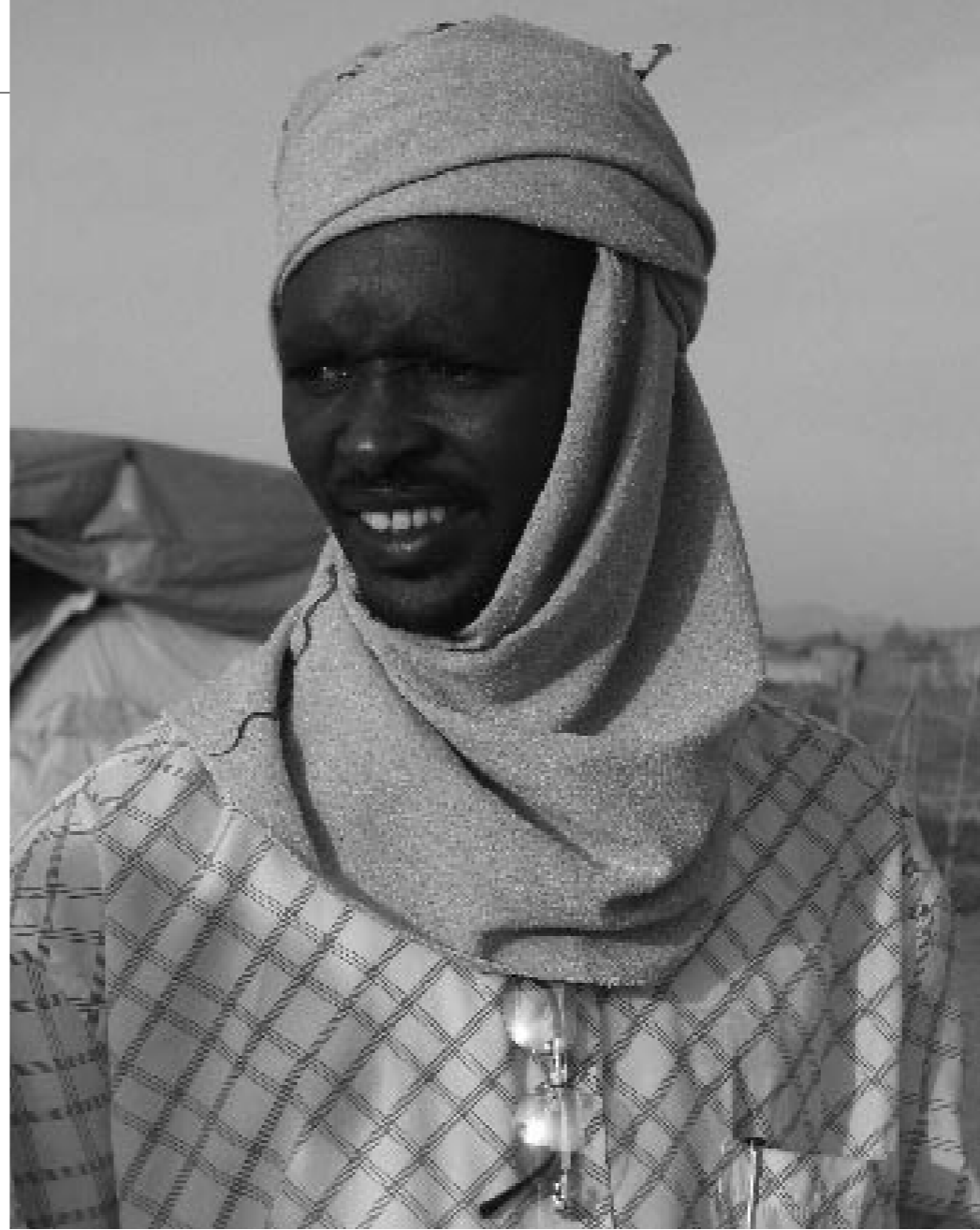
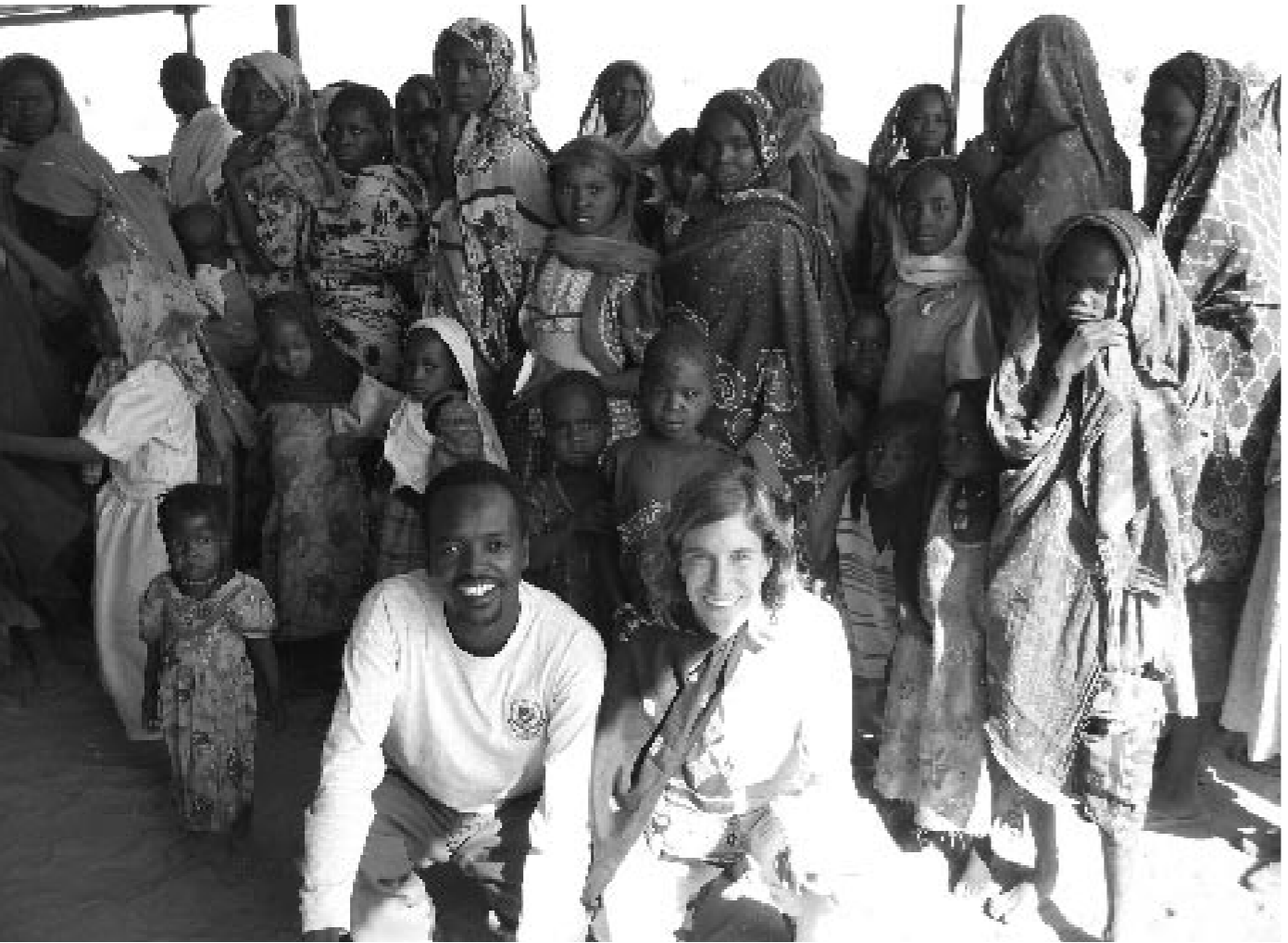
**RM:** What can people do to help?

**DH:** Everyone who has a conscience, when they read the book, I think they will know what they should do. At least they have to put their voices with my voice and advocate for the Darfuris. They have to ask their media to write about Darfur, they have to ask their leaders to gain access, to stop what has been happening in Darfur for five years. In western countries it is hard to convince anyone if you don't have reports in the newspapers or on TV, but the only way for me was to write a book, to let everyone know. I don't have a TV, I don't have a radio, but people can read my book. They can ask their governments to send peacekeepers into Darfur, they have to advocate taking in of some refugees, especially children. I was hoping that every country in Europe that I have travelled to would help. If everyone I saw would take at least five kids, and

1 Nicholas D. Kristof, *The Witness Next Door*, NY Times, 14 May 2007



**Daoud left Sudan in 2003, and spent three years in a refugee camp in Chad (above and above left), regularly crossing back over the border in his work as an interpreter**



send them to school, it would be much better for the future, for them, and for us in Darfur. But unfortunately, after five years, in all the countries I have been to I didn't find anyone from my people who had been accepted as refugees. Not in any country in Europe.

**Christopher Nugent, Daoud's lawyer:** There is no refugee resettlement, he was the third Darfuri refugee to the United States, now there are five, but they're not resettling Darfuri refugees. He's very concerned about the orphans and the widows in the camps who are at risk, and if each country were to take a few, that would be a symbolic and important commitment.

**RM:** So you were only the third Darfuri to gain refugee status in the US?

**DH:** Yes, it is unbelievable, but here it is also a problem, zero maybe. In many European countries it may be zero. I saw only a few people in Italy, but in all the other nine or ten

**Above: Daoud with a group of Darfuri refugees**  
**Right: Daoud with Philip Cox, a British film maker for whom he acted as an interpreter and guide in Darfur**



countries there were zero Darfuris, which is more shocking to me.

**RM:** What about the role of China in the conflict?

**DH:** I think the Chinese have to stop their support for the Sudanese government. We have to boycott the Beijing Olympics. The western countries are confused. They don't know how to say to China, stop. The Chinese are supporting the government of Sudan a lot. Right now we have the Beijing Olympics, the western people seem prepared to go to the Olympics, and they

**'If there is peace I can return. But I am concerned only about the two and a half million refugees. They must be able to return to their homes'**

have forgotten all about what China is doing in Tibet and in Darfur. I don't even know why we are showing all these tragedies in Tibet if still people are saying that 'this is policy and that is sport', but sport is human beings. Sport is not cars or weapons.

**RM:** What is happening in Darfur now?

**DH:** It has changed for the worse. I left just one year ago, and there are now 28 rebel groups and three different Janjaweed militias, the government... There is a war in South Sudan, Khartoum was attacked in

the last two weeks, everything has changed for the worse. The president, al-Bashir, has declared war on Darfur. So everything is getting worse.

**RM:** Do you have contact with any friends, family or former colleagues who are still in Darfur or in Chad?

**DH:** Colleagues yes, sometimes, but it is not easy to contact them. Sometimes.

**DH:** How did you come to write your book?

**RM:** I didn't decide to write a book, the book just came (laughs). In 2005, I worked in the field with a journalist called Nicholas Kristof. Later he heard that I was in prison in Sudan with Paul Salopek, and then when I was granted refugee status in the United States he wrote a column about me in the *New York Times*. Random House saw the editorial and called me and wondered if I would like to write a book. So I asked people [Daoud was working as

**Above and above right: Daoud in Chad, after his release from prison**

a spokesperson for Save Darfur at the time], and they said 'that's a good idea, that would be a good thing to do' and I said OK, the book is coming.

**RM:** Do you feel settled now in the US?

**DH:** I don't know how much you can describe my life in the US. It has been very short, and I have been travelling a lot since I got there. I say that I am currently living in Baltimore, but I don't even know where I am living because I am travelling a lot, everywhere. First working with Save Darfur on a speaking tour, then the book, the US book tour and the European book tour. It is very hard work but the life is OK.

**RM:** What do you think the next year holds for you?

**DH:** I don't know. I'm not a person to put things any more than 24 hours ahead. I am only here (in London) until Saturday, then on Sunday or Monday I have to leave. Who knows, next year? I don't know. I think

things will be going well, I will be in school maybe, I will figure out where I have to live in the US.

**RM:** After everything you've been through, are you an optimist or a pessimist about human nature?

**DH:** I am always optimistic about human nature. That doesn't mean that people have to sleep through problems, or forget about problems. I have tried to do my best to tell them that here I am, there is Darfur, and here you are, and here is what you can do. I try to bring them to do something for Darfur, that is my message. I think one of the problems is that there is not any coverage of Darfur. It is very sad for me. But human nature is like that. They need someone to tell them about the problems and how to be strong.

**To find out more:**  
[www.fund4darfur.org](http://www.fund4darfur.org)  
[www.savedarfur.org](http://www.savedarfur.org)  
[www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)

PHOTOS: MEGAN MCKENNA; PHILIP COX/NATIVE VOICE FILMS

**ITI Bulletin has made a donation to the Fund for Darfur in lieu of payment for this interview.**