

Initiatives of Change Conference:

## "AUSTRALIA AS A NEIGHBOUR"

International House, Melbourne, Australia, 12-16 January 2007

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Public Forum, 13 January 2007

### **Sudanese Youth for Reconciliation and Hope (edited transcript):**

#### **Deng Riak:**

I was born in South Sudan during the war. I fled to Ethiopia in the care of my older sister. In 1991 another war broke out and we were forced to run for our lives to Kenya. In Kenya life was tough for us refugees so we decided to migrate to Australia. Those who have experienced refugee life know how terrible it is. Especially when you have fled your country to end up finding [people] who are unwelcoming.

I left Sudan at a very tender age, leaving my parents and family behind. As a young refugee I endured starvation, drugs, floods, mosquito bites, seeing dead people, wild animals. Especially hunger. Most of the time I would go to bed with an empty stomach. I slept shivering on a wet floor. These horrendous memories are still fresh in my mind. The main thing is I survived.

When I joined Sudanese Youth for Reconciliation and Hope, I told myself, "Here is a chance at last for Sudanese to make a difference." I was motivated by the thought that I didn't want Sudanese children to go through what I had been through.

#### **Ahmed Gillanie:**

My story is very different from Deng's. He struggled through his life but I lived a comfortable life. I was born in Saudi Arabia, raised in Qatar, spent a few years in Sudan and am now in Australia. My life was happy, but when I look closer at it I see the way I used to treat my brothers from the South, the arrogance, the racism, thinking I am a better person. Because I came from an Arabic background, or because I am a Muslim I thought I am better than everyone.

So I was shocked with the reality when I left Sudan and went to a country where we were a minority. One day I met a group of locals and without any reason they jumped on top of me and started kicking me. They called me names, the same names I used to call my brothers from the South. That day I went home and looked at myself in the mirror and said, Well, I deserve it.

Coming to Australia and walking around the streets you see it is full of Africans and most of them are Sudanese. You see Southerners sitting by themselves, and Northerners sitting by themselves and we are all Sudanese and nearly all speak the same language. I said to myself, the war is in Sudan but why have we brought the war with us over here? Why do we still hate each other? I met a friend and he told me about the group Sudanese for Reconciliation and Hope and the work we are trying to do to reconcile our own people, to support the peace agreement which has been signed in Sudan between the North and the South.

We started to say sorry to our brothers from the South, not because I killed his brother or

sister, but because I said nothing [about] what was happening in Sudan, the killing, the genocide. And rather than saying no to the government or trying to support them or at least to comfort them and make their life a bit more comfortable in the north, I made it harder for them by abusing them and calling them names. So that is why we started saying sorry to them.

We started to get some successful things in Australia. We decided to take our work back to Sudan because that is where the problem started and that is where it should be ended.

In November I and another member of the group went together to Sudan. The day we landed at the airport we saw a lot of UN planes. We said, "Sudan is in trouble. Otherwise, what are they doing over here?" We discovered that most of the people living over there don't know what is happening in Darfur, the genocide. They are being blinded by the government, publicity, the media.

We went to the South for four days, and we met some government officials. We discovered the people still not believing this peace agreement will work, even in Khartoum in the North. Everyone keeps saying, "We had the same agreement before from the former government and where is it now?" The Northerners don't trust the Southerners and vice versa. So we said, having a conference in Sudan to build our nation socially and to change our own nation is very important.

So that is why we decided to have a conference in Juba, where the war was started, and to mobilise a lot of Sudanese youth, from the North, the South, the West, and get them together and open our hearts.

***Sudanese Youth for Reconciliation and Hope** is a Melbourne-based group working to end civil war in their country of origin. The group comes from different parts of Sudan and from different sides in the conflict. **Deng Riak** from Southern Sudan came to Australia in 2004 and works as a security officer. **Ahmed Gillanie** from Northern Sudan has lived in Australia for 3 years and is studying legal services.*