

Testimony of Elizabeth Anok Kuch

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**Submitted to the Tom Lantos Human Rights
Commission**

**On the Subject of “Refugees and IDPs in Sudan: The
Crisis Continues”**

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Good afternoon. I would like to express my appreciation to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for inviting me to be here today. I am happy to share with you my life experience and suggestions about how to better protect refugees.

My name is Elizabeth Anok Kuch and I am one of the fortunate Lost Girls from Southern Sudan who survived and was resettled to the United States in 2000.

I was born in the Jonglei State of Sudan. My father had four wives and many children. My mother was his third wife and in total, they had seven children.

One evening, at the age of 5, I was awakened by the sounds of gunshots and people screaming. I ran out of my room to see what was going on and couldn't believe my eyes. There was fire and dead bodies everywhere. People were running in all directions. I called out for my mother and father but I couldn't find them. I saw one of my uncles laying on the ground and bleeding. I ran away as fast as I could.

The next morning, other people who had escaped the attacks congregated under some trees. I walked through the crowd hoping I would find my mother. I knew if I found her, she would have some food, water and a place to sleep. I never found my mom or my dad, but this dream has remained with me.

As the days passed, I was still tired, hungry, thirsty and confused. My feet hurt because we spent hours every day walking barefoot. I would go to sleep hoping that when I woke up, things would be back to normal. But when I woke up, everything was still the same.

One day, I stubbed my foot on a rock and injured my big toe. It was so painful that I couldn't walk. An older lady tried to carry me but I was too heavy. She told me that I would have to walk. The enemy, which I

later learned was the Sudanese government, was following us and would catch us if we delayed.

Days passed by and I kept asking myself, “Why me? What did I do to deserve all of this?”

The lady took good care of me, but this did not last long. One day, I woke up and found out that she had died.

The following day, our group needed to keep moving but I was still in pain from my wound. I couldn’t keep up with the group. Later men holding guns approached me. One of them offered to help but I was afraid. I thought they were the enemy. They told me that they were members of the Southern People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) and that they were on our side.

The SPLA helped to guide me and thousands of the other Lost Boys and Girls from Southern Sudan to Ethiopia. Many of the children did not survive the journey. They died from natural causes, diseases, hunger or thirst, attacks from the enemy and wild animals.

When we arrived to a refugee camp in Ethiopia, there was no food. I stayed with another lady, who took care of me while I helped her with chores. I went to the market to beg and pick garbage from the dumpster. I would bring the food home for us to eat.

As the weeks passed by, the situation improved. The United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, brought us food, clothing and other supplies. People started building shelters and schools. There were a few doctors’ offices and hospitals. Even though things were better compared to walking barefoot from Sudan to Ethiopia, it was not home. I missed my mother and wished every day that I could see her.

Although children could go to school in the refugee camp, I didn’t know what school was. In my village in Sudan, we did not have any schools.

In the camp, no one encouraged me to go to school, so I did not attend classes.

Four years later, a war between Ethiopia and Eritrea forced us to leave Ethiopia. We had to walk back to Sudan. The enemy struck again and we fled to Kenya on foot.

In 1992, we arrived at a refugee camp in Kenya. It was a dry and dusty place. There was not enough food and access to water was a problem. Three times a day, camp officials would let water run from the taps for a total of two hours. You had to wait in a long line to get the water. If you were the last person in line, the water would be cut off before your turn.

Food was being distributed in the camp but we had no way to cook it. Women and young girls would have to find firewood. But, in most cases, we would come back without any because we faced physical and verbal harassment from local Kenyans.

In the refugee camp, women and girls had a lot of responsibilities – fetching water and firewood, cooking, and taking care of the households. Although I was able to attend classes in this refugee camp, it was hard to manage all of my chores plus school. Some girls would just give up on school or were not given the option to attend.

Security in the camp was a big issue. We faced threats if we left the camp. People would be robbed or beaten. Locals would also enter the camp during the night and kill people for no reason. We couldn't defend ourselves and the camp officials did not provide us with protection.

While I was in the refugee camp in Kenya, I was introduced to someone who ended being my step-brother. I then met two other step-brothers in the camp. When refugee processing started for resettlement to the United States, my step-brother applied and included me and my other two step-brothers on his application. When I found out that we had been accepted to come to the United States, it was like a dream come true. However, I

knew that leaving Africa meant that I may never know what happened to the rest of my family.

We left for the United States on November 27, 2000. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service placed my step-siblings and me with a foster care program in Pennsylvania run by Lutheran Children and Family Services. Although I was anxious about how we would survive in a new country, staff from the program and our Sudanese caseworker met us in the airport and helped us to get oriented.

It wasn't until 2002 that I learned what had happened to my family. My father was killed in Sudan in the civil war. Two of my siblings did not survive either. However, my mother and four of my siblings were alive and in a refugee camp in Uganda.

I filed for them to join me in the United States, but after September 11th, refugee resettlement to the United States was much more difficult due to heightened security concerns. So, they decided to be resettled in Australia. I keep in touch with them regularly but I still have not had a chance to see them. I hope that one day my family and I will be able to visit them.

Since arriving to the United States, I have been able to finish my high school education and am currently taking college classes. I have remained active on Sudan issues and am grateful that as a woman living in the United States, I have the opportunity to be involved in different ways to continue helping Sudan.

The following are recommendations for the U.S. government to help refugees:

1. Provide NGOs greater access to refugee camps to enable them to help refugees advocate for improvements in the camp.
2. Provide greater security to refugees in refugee camps.

3. Better oversee the delivery of aid destined for refugee camps to ensure that corrupt governments or individuals do not steal materials, supplies or other forms of assistance.
4. Expand assistance and services to refugees in camps, including food, water, medical care and education.
5. Increase ongoing training and employment opportunities for adults living in the camp. For example, men are accustomed to providing for their families but living in a camp, we all become dependent on outside aid.
6. Create special parenting and professional training classes for women in camps.
7. Provide more counseling to refugees. Refugees have experienced tremendous trauma and suffering and need special support assistance.

Thank you again for your time and I hope you have a better understanding the challenges refugees face, particularly young girls. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.