

Festival of Books highlights plight of Lost Boys of Sudan

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Abstract: The south, which is inhabited primarily by Christians and those who follow traditional African religions, is expected to vote in January to secede from the mostly Muslim north, the culmination of a 2005 peace treaty that ended more than two decades of civil war that left 2 million dead. New refugees or refugees that have been here for a long period of time would have the same sorts of struggles that other people in the community would, with the added layer of having to learn about the culture and language and get moving forward.

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Full text: The prairie grasslands of South Dakota are a world away from the war-torn Sudan that Michael Maguet left behind at age 6.

After civil war erupted in Sudan, Maguet sought refuge in Ethiopia in 1987. From there, he moved to Kenya and to Sioux Falls in 2001.

His story is similar to that of many Sudanese refugees - stories that are highlighted this year in the Festival of Books, which is today and Saturday in downtown Sioux Falls. The immigration experience is the focus of the festival, with extra attention on the Lost Boys of Sudan.

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Blog: Insights leading up to the big event

About 3,000 Sudanese call Sioux Falls home, and some say the extra attention from the festival is coming at the right time. Sudan is facing a big political year in 2011.

Maguet found that life in the U.S. had challenges. It was difficult to get a job, and his English skills weren't as good as he would have liked. Maguet, now 29, is pursuing his master of business administration degree at Colorado Technical University. He's waiting for his wife, Yar Markol, to join him from Sudan.

His story is similar to that of real-life protagonist Valentino Achak Deng in the novel "What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng," released four years ago. It was named the One Book South Dakota, recommended for everyone in the state to read this year.

The novel, written by Dave Eggers, details Deng's harrowing experiences as a Lost Boy during Sudan's civil war and life in the U.S. as a refugee.

Deng spoke at the Clinton Global Initiative on Wednesday, and Eggers will speak at 7 p.m. Saturday in Sioux Falls as part of the South Dakota Festival of Books.

Local Sudanese leaders hope Saturday's discussion will draw attention to the pressing needs of the Sioux Falls Sudanese community and educate the public on the contentious political climate in Sudan.

The south, which is inhabited primarily by Christians and those who follow traditional African religions, is expected to vote in January to secede from the mostly Muslim north, the culmination of a 2005 peace treaty that ended more than two decades of civil war that left 2 million dead.

President Obama is scheduled to meet today in New York with senior officials from north and south Sudan to try to prevent a conflict from reigniting.

"As a resident here, South Dakota is our second home," said Julius Badigo, president of the South Dakota Sudanese Community Corp., a nonprofit organization based in Sioux Falls. "This is a promised land, we call it. That land (Sudan) is our motherland. ...We need the attention on this issue about the referendum."

The first Sudanese refugees moved to Sioux Falls in the early 1990s, and another group of Lost Boys arrived in the early 2000s.

Sudanese community leaders say Sudanese in Sioux Falls still face an uphill battle, even for those who arrived here almost 18 years ago.

Employment and learning English are the top concerns for immigrants and refugees, said Donna Magnuson, director of the refugee and immigration center at Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota.

"Refugee resettlement, from a national viewpoint, is really about early self-sufficiency, and that's why so much of what we do is geared towards integration. It's really about helping people start fresh and start over."

Christy Nicolaisen, the Multi-Cultural Center's new director, met Tuesday with Badigo and Maguet, who is the vice president of the South Dakota Sudanese Community Corp. She was optimistic about the event. "I think it's positive anytime you can highlight a community," she said.

Saturday's discussion is a chance to create more community relations, said the Rev. Jenina Gatnoor, a minister to the Sudanese community based out of Zion Lutheran Church in Sioux Falls. "There's a good friendship between America and southern Sudan now, and we love to see if we can build that friendship more. ... South Dakota is a very excellent place to build that bridge."

Even though the Sudanese civil war ended in 2005, the stories of former refugees such as Maguet are far from complete.

Sudanese in Sioux Falls struggle with pursuing higher education, finding jobs and understanding American culture, Badigo said.

Magnuson said that difficulty finding jobs might point to more economic issues than birthplace issues. "New refugees or refugees that have been here for a long period of time would have the same sorts of struggles that other people in the community would, with the added layer of having to learn about the culture and language and get moving forward."

Many of the Lost Boys who arrived in Sioux Falls about 10 years ago have gone back to school, Magnuson noted.

Jacob Manyok, 31, received a bachelor's degree in religion from Berea College in Kentucky in 2008. He moved to Sioux Falls a year ago and has only found work at John Morrell. Badigo wants to find work in a social work field. But he hasn't pursued an advanced degree and admits that he needs a business degree to move ahead. "John Morrell is not something for me," Manyok says. "I'm not learning anything there. Being there, cutting from 7 a.m. to 3:30, there's no learning there. I need something that I will pursue for a long period of time."

Manyok, who is from Sudan and moved to the U.S. in June 2001, says he has applied for several jobs. Finding suitable references is difficult, he says. He needs his job because he supports family members in Sudan, including his 15-year-old nephew's schooling in Kenya.

Adjusting to a different culture is not easy, especially when many Sudanese arrive in the U.S. by themselves, Gatnoor says.

"It's ... a big difference from where we come from, because here, we have access to all good things that we do not have there. We have school for your kids, school for yourself, a job, place to live. It's still, there's a challenge always."

The Associated Press contributed to this report. Reach BryAnn Becker at 977-3908.

IF YOU GO

Tonight

Film screening of "God Grew Tired of Us"

7 p.m. to 8:45 p.m.

Multi-Cultural Center

Four boys from Sudan embark on a journey to America after years of wandering Sub-Saharan Africa in search of safety

Saturday

A Conversation with Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak Deng

Doors open 6:30 p.m. Event starts at 7 p.m., Orpheum Theater

Join Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak Deng for a conversation on "What is the What." Moderated by NPR's Deborah Amos. Book signing to follow.

Register and find more information at www.sdbookfestival.com.

Twitter coverage

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