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## **Enslaved!**



Simon Deng, left, and Francis Bok spoke today in Pittsburg. The pair are active in efforts to rebuild and bring piece to their former homeland of Sudan. (ANDREW D. BROSIG/THE MORNING SUN)

Francis Bok has a message for those who think that slavery is a thing of the past. "Americans believe that slavery ended in 1865," said Bok. "They are wrong. From the age of 7 to 17, I was a slave."

Bok, a native of Sudan, accompanied the Rev. Tom Prichard of Sudan Sunrise to the Tuesday meeting of the Pittsburg Noon Rotary Club. With them was Simon Deng, one of the Sudanese "Lost Boys."

Bok, is author of "Escape from Slavery," an autobiography tracing his experiences and eventual escape. "In 1986, when I was 7, my mother sent me to a local market with eggs and peanuts for sale," he said. "I was captured by Arab raiders from northern Sudan." He later learned they had also raided his village, Gurion, in southern Sudan and killed his parents.

Bok spent 10 years as a slave, working as a herdsman for the goats and cattle belonging to his Arab master. At 17 he escaped and made his way to Khartoum, Sudan's capital, aided by a friendly Arab truck driver who strongly disapproved of slavery. He later went to Cairo, Egypt, and in 1999 came to the United States through the sponsorship of Lutheran Social Services.

"I joined the American Anti-Slavery Group in 2000, and I have dedicated my life story to help the southern Sudanese and the people of Darfur," Bok said. "My job now is to go out and speak."

He does a lot of that, and has been featured in the New York Times, Boston Globe and the front page of the Wall Street Journal. He has also been on numerous TV talk shows. "I've been on everything but Larry King and Oprah," Bok said.

Simon Deng is not a former slave, but one of the "Lost Boys" of Sudan, victims of the civil wars that have torn his country in recent years.

"In 1987, when I was 6, the Muslims raided our village," he said. "My father and some of the other elders of the village went out with spears, but the raiders had guns and my father was killed. The raiders were hunting the children, and we kept running. We walked for 90 days."

The children had little food or water, and many of them died from hunger, thirst and illness. "Lions ate some of us, and crocodiles ate some," Deng said.

The children who survived eventually ended up in refugee camps, first in Egypt and later in Kenya. "I was in a camp in Kenya for nine years," Deng said. "Then they said I could come to the United States. My plane was due to land on Sept. 11, 2001, and we couldn't land because of the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The pilot told us that all of America was under attack."

The plane was rerouted to Canada, where Deng spent eight more days.

It was at a stadium in Newfoundland that Deng saw, on TV, the man responsible for the 9/11 attack - Osama bin Laden. The face was very familiar to him, because the terrorist leader spent several years in Sudan before going to Afghanistan.

"The concept that came into my mind was that Osama was hunting for us," Deng said. "I was in New York, at Ground Zero, two days after the attack, and I was crying," Bok added. "I suffered, and the United States suffered, both because of the same man." Bok and Deng are both involved in efforts to aid their fellow Sudanese, and were scheduled to go on a trip of relief and reconciliation to Sudan in January. Bok was unable to go because of illness, but Deng went. "I had hoped to see my uncle, but I learned he had died just a few days before, on Dec. 26," Deng said. "Now I want to help his children, maybe get them to Kenya and see that they can go to school."

The killing continues in Darfur, and the south is still suffering from the aftermath of war. "We went over with things like clothing and powdered milk," Rev. Prichard said. "There is a great need to rebuild southern Sudan. We were accused of trying to convert the Muslims, and we were. We hope to convert them from enemies to friends." Though they are devoted to helping their homeland, Bok and Deng, both in the Kansas City area, are in the process of becoming U.S. citizens. "America has given us a second chance at life," Bok said.

"When we were in Ethiopia, no one felt sorry for what had happened to us," Deng said. "When we were in Kenya, no one felt sorry for us. But when we came here to America, you are sorry for us."

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