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In Darfur, a Journalist Branches Out

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EL FASHER, Sudan, March 3 -- In this dusty market town in northern Darfur, a lucky few with satellite dishes can get news of the war surrounding them from CNN or the BBC. Others rely on a tree.

For the past 10 years, Awatif Ahmed Isshag has handwritten monthly dispatches and commentary about life in El Fasher and hung them on a short, wiry tree that scatters shade along the yellow-sand lane by her house.

For the past four years, the dispatches have included items about the conflict in Darfur that appear to represent the only independent local reporting about the fighting in a region where most media hew to the official government line.

Along with advice on how to be a lady, Isshag, a slight 24-year-old with an undergraduate degree in economics, has satirized the local governor and described the suffering of displaced families and gun battles in the markets of El Fasher. She recently wished the town a happy New Year, and compared the security conditions here to the situation in Lebanon.

Working in her new office -- a cement-floored, cracked-walled space in a building with faulty wiring -- Isshag dismissed the notion that she was doing anything unusual.

"Journalism is a profession of risk," she said matter-of-factly, her voice echoing slightly in the nearly empty room. She also said, "I will fast to get the story."

She estimated that 100 people a day stop to read the newspaper on the tree as they make their way through the neighborhood of dried-mud walls and painted steel doors. She refers to it casually as "the world paper."

Officially, it is called "Al Raheel," which means something close to "moving," a phrase that gently describes the 2.5 million people displaced in Darfur since 2003, when rebels took up arms against a central government they accused of hoarding power and wealth.

In response, the government armed nomadic tribesmen and launched a campaign of systematic violence. Experts estimate that as many as 450,000 people have died as a result of the fighting, though the government disputes the figure.

Isshag has aunts, uncles and cousins in several refugee camps around Darfur, and her grandfather died in one called Kalma after fleeing his village.

Around El Fasher, a bustling town of one-story brick buildings and tiny, blue Korean taxis that skid alongside donkey carts in the sand, things are relatively calm, if difficult. The war has driven up rents and the price of nearly everything else. Basic resources such as water are under strain as the town continues to absorb a flow

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of people who have abandoned their villages or nearby camps.

Isshag, who is pursuing a master's degree in economics, said she would like to start her own company to help develop El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur state.

For now, though, she is consumed with Al Raheel. Recently, she found financial supporters abroad who had heard about her work and sent a computer and printer. In the next week or so, she plans to launch a printed newspaper that she will distribute around town for free.

For now, her articles sometimes appear in a newspaper about Darfur published by the African Union, which has troops deployed in the region to enforce a failing peace agreement.

"People know me now," she said.

Isshag's sister originally started the newspaper on the tree, writing articles about El Fasher but with an emphasis on women's rights. When she died in 1998, Isshag took over. She was 15.

She had some experience working on a student radio program for children, for which she would interview people around town. "From the beginning, I liked journalism," she said. "I wanted to discover those who are intelligent and have talent, and I wanted to talk to them."

Isshag's father, a policeman, is supportive. Her mother relieves her daughter of chores so she has time to write the paper, the latest issue of which included stories about security in El Fasher, a famous Sudanese lawyer, general wishes for love and peace, and a poem criticizing government officials who pretend that everything is okay.

In another poem, she referred to the local governor derisively as "the sultan."

Her younger brother told her to be careful about saying such things. During a trip in January to Khartoum, Sudan's capital, Isshag received a harassing phone call that she believes came from someone in the government.

"He said to stop writing and to take care of your studies," she said, adding that the call hardly had its intended effect. "I'm not doing something wrong that I should be afraid. I'm doing something right."

Around Isshag's neighborhood Saturday afternoon, people passing by said they often read the news on the tree, or at least skimmed the headlines. Some said they preferred not to read about war; others said they considered it more truthful than what they hear on the government-run television and radio.

"This is a magazine that shows exactly what is happening in Darfur," said Mohamed Ali Hassan, 23. "The TV, sometimes they don't tell everything."

Readers are welcome to write corrections and criticisms along the margins of stories, Isshag said, and they often do.

Recently, a friendly government official in town offered her the office, and on Friday, Isshag was working on the next issue.

She said it would probably include local reaction to a recent announcement by the International Criminal Court, which named a high-ranking government official and a militia commander as war crimes suspects. And perhaps also an editorial.

"A message to people who are attacking," she said. "Don't send fire, send words. Words connect people."

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