

HAWA AND HER FRIENDSHIPS WITH FATIMA AND NADIA

(Names changed to protect identities.)



HOLOCAUST
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DAY TRUST

This is a story about what can happen after escaping a genocide. It is a story of friendship and support. It is the story of three women from Darfur who are now building a life in the UK.



'One hand can't clap.
Being together is what we
need as Sudanese people.
We need to be united.'

Hawa is from the Fur tribe, the largest group in Darfur – a region in the west of Sudan, in north-east Africa.

Hawa was a bright child and a good student. She achieved a place at the University of Khartoum to study Biology and Chemistry, where she met Fatima. Hawa became a Chemistry teacher, married and started a family. She and Fatima began working together in their home villages in Darfur teaching Arabic and supporting the farming communities. They felt lucky to have gained an education and wanted to give something back.

In 2003 war broke out in Darfur between the nomadic tribes of Arabic descent, and the farming tribes of black African descent. The nomadic Arabic tribes had the support of the Sudanese Government, and began an assault on the villages and communities across Darfur. The Arab militia, called *Janjaweed* – 'the devils on horseback' - had been given funding and weaponry from the Sudanese Government to implement a 'scorched earth' policy in Darfur; going to villages to kill and arrest people, burning property and destroying crops.

Although President Omar al-Bashir, the Sudanese Government and the *Janjaweed* were charged by the International Criminal Court for genocide in 2010, al-Bashir is still President, and the genocide continues today.

In 2009, Hawa and her husband managed to raise enough money to escape Darfur with their two young sons, and travel to the UK, and they were given permission to remain. Hawa now works to try and support more people to escape the genocide.

'This is hurting my heart. I lost a lot of my family back home. 150 people in one village – all of them died, all of them buried in one place. Everyone now is in camps in Darfur, other people are displaced to Khartoum and Chad. They are suffering. They don't have the money to escape Sudan.'

Hawa's third child was born in the UK, but she has since separated from her husband and is a single mother. Hawa regularly takes part in humanitarian work between the UK and Darfur and demonstrates against the Sudanese Government. There are many rumours that the Sudanese Government seeks information on anyone speaking out against them, and targets those people's families in Darfur.

Fatima came to the UK in 2007. When she first arrived she faced many challenges, recalling that: 'The language was a challenge, but also the culture. It was a big jump from Africa to Europe – everything is different – the way people behave, the streets, the food, everything. It took me time.'

Hawa and Fatima, like many refugees, were also dealing with grief and trauma following their experiences of genocide and it is very difficult for them to revisit these memories.

Once settled, Fatima learnt English, took an IT course and began working for organisations that support refugees. It was now 10 years since she had worked with Hawa as a student in Khartoum, but she had not forgotten her. She made contact with Hawa when she arrived in the UK and the two women began working together again, setting up a support group and doing community development work with refugees. Their friendship from years before blossomed again.

Hawa and Fatima work with an organisation called Waging Peace - a UK human rights organisation campaigning against the genocide and systematic human rights violations in Sudan. They were invited to a reception for survivors of the Holocaust and genocide at St James's Palace, by Holocaust Memorial Day Trust's Patron HRH The Prince of Wales, in February 2017.

Shortly before this event, Hawa was introduced to Nadia through Waging Peace. Nadia had come to the UK in 2008, also from Darfur. When she first arrived, Nadia 'suffered a lot from anxiety and mental health problems but didn't know [her] rights or how to ask for help and support.' The two women had lots in common, and quickly became friends. Having the support of a friend really helped Nadia.

At St James's Palace, Nadia and Hawa arrived together. Fatima, who arrived after them, walked towards their table wondering who Hawa was speaking to. Fatima and Nadia recognised each other and could not believe it – they had been very good friends at high school in Darfur, and had not seen each other since. Nadia said:

'When I saw her face I remembered all our times in high school together. We were very close friends. We had big dreams at that time – we both wanted to be doctors. But war interfered with our study and lives.'

The two women sat down and spoke for hours; Hawa joked they didn't give her a chance to speak! Nadia now regularly visits her friends, staying with both Hawa and Fatima in turns.

Fatima summed up why these friendships are so important to her now:

'Finding Nadia and Hawa again has made a big change in my life. I believe that talking is healing – it's like a medication. We are going to keep these friendships and we are looking forward to the future. Bad things have happened and are still happening, but we try to keep hope – maybe tomorrow is better.'

Find out more... Genocide in Darfur: hmd.org.uk/darfur
Waging Peace: wagingpeace.info