

Darfurian women  
collect firewood.



Photo by: Erin Boyd

When Samira, a young Darfurian woman, fled a Janjaweed attack, she saw her village burned and community members she had known all her life killed. She, herself, was beaten and raped. When Samira and other villagers made it to a camp for internally displaced persons (IDP) in South Darfur, they received basic shelter and rations of donated rice, millet, soy, and oil.

Life in an IDP camp is hard. People are crowded into tents that are cold in the winter, hot in the summer, and offer little protection against dust, windstorms, insects, and rodents. For many, the few possessions they carried on their backs when they fled are all they have. They must wait in line for hours for food, water, and health care. Women are at particular risk when they must leave their camps to search for firewood. People are haunted by the sadness of what they have lost in the war – loved ones, homes, farms, and animals they worked hard to care for.

## Background

Darfur is home to one of the gravest humanitarian crises in the world. In 2003, when a rebel insurgency began in Darfur, the Sudanese government armed local Arab militias, known as the Janjaweed, to carry out attacks against Darfurians – rebels and civilians, alike. The Janjaweed laid waste to farming communities, destroying villages, croplands, and wells; raiding cattle and food; and killing and raping civilians.

Over 300,000 people have been killed, and hundreds of villages have been wiped off the map. Over 2.5 million people – like Samira – have been uprooted from their homes into IDP camps in Darfur, while another 250,000 have fled across the border to refugee camps in Chad.

Today, the violence has spiraled out of control, as Janjaweed and rebels fight among themselves, as well as against each other, for land and power.

## What is a humanitarian crisis?

*A humanitarian crisis is a situation that negatively affects large numbers of people, destroying human life, homes, and livelihoods and putting people's basic needs at risk. It originally referred only to natural disasters and environmental devastation. Today, the definition includes the effects of war, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and other forms of extreme violence.*

# How UUSC's disaster response is different

Through its Rights in Humanitarian Crises Program, UUSC responds to disasters where human rights are threatened, focusing on defending the rights of marginalized and oppressed people.

Major disasters, be they wars or hurricanes, tend to hurt most those who are already marginalized in society. In places as far apart as New Orleans and Uganda, inequalities arising from gender, race, religion, and class differences are intensified after a disaster, with people near the bottom of the ladder being knocked down a few more rungs, making their recovery all the more difficult.

Behind every disaster reported on television lies another tragedy: the people who are left out of relief and recovery efforts because of who they are.

In Aceh, Indonesia, the people left out are the widows of the 2004 tsunami, who are being denied land inheritance rights. In New Orleans and Mississippi, they are people of color, who continue to be left out of the recovery process.

## Cross-cultural learning

Working across the world in disasters, UUSC has begun to see how patterns of inequality repeat themselves. When the earthquake struck Pakistan in 2005, our experience in post-tsunami Indonesia and Sri Lanka told us that widows would likely face hurdles to claiming inheritance for themselves and their children.

When women in these societies lose their husbands in a disaster, they often lose the security of an income. A widow's right to inherit her husband's property, his shop or farm, can mean the difference between survival and starvation, particularly after a disaster has destroyed all else.



Women in Pakistan-administered Kashmir discuss strategies for reducing gender discrimination in a workshop led by UUSC partner organization Bedari.

Photo by: Gretchen Altner/UUSC

In November 2007, UUSC held a cross-cultural learning exchange in Aceh, which brought together grassroots Pakistani and Indonesian activists working on women's inheritance rights. Although they are from different countries and speak different languages, they recognized each other's experiences. The two groups shared ways to work within the system to assert rights guaranteed by law.

## Empowering local responders

From our experience with the 2004 tsunami, we also knew that big international aid agencies tend to ignore local organizations, even though local groups are often the first responders. Because of their relationships in and knowledge of local communities and cultures, these groups have important information needed for building effective aid programs that help the most vulnerable. UUSC employed a consultant in Pakistan with many connections to these local groups. He helped us identify a key Pakistani organization, which we supported to set up a local NGO coordination and information center where Pakistani NGOs could pool and share their knowledge of affected communities. This center became a reference point for international NGOs operating in the region, helping them to tap into local information.

*Viola and her family left their flooded home in New Orleans for a grueling journey to another town. But Viola's heart stayed back in New Orleans. "There was work to be done," she said. "But where do you start when it's all gone?" A longtime activist and director of the Welfare Rights Organization, Viola found a way. "I thought, 'Well, I have myself.'" Viola got to work helping others stranded by the disaster. She rebuilt her organization and locates temporary housing and aid so others can return.*

# Bringing the lenses of gender, race, and class to disaster response

UUSC's Rights in Humanitarian Crises Program examines disasters and their aftermaths through the lenses of gender, race, and class. This helps us better understand and respond to how members of marginalized groups in crisis situations often lose their basic human rights – such as their right to personal safety and bodily integrity, their right to relief and recovery aid, and their right to return home.

In Darfur, women and girls face risks unique to their gender. Their traditional role in society requires that they collect firewood, water, and fodder, both for household use and to sell for income. As IDPs, they

must leave the relative safety of the camp to carry out these responsibilities; although, once outside the camp, they are vulnerable to assault, abduction, and rape by armed groups who operate in the region. Thousands of women and girls are attacked in this way.

To address sexual and gender-based violence against Darfurian women and girls, UUSC provides funds and personnel support to women's centers in IDP camps, where they can learn about alternative-income sources and fuel-efficient stoves, access rape counseling, and organize so they can negotiate with camp leaders to improve their safety.

## Seeking a balance between disaster response and long-term humanitarian crises



Photo by: Sarah Peck/UUSC

*The Grand Bayou school at the southern tip of Plaquemines Parish, still wrecked, is a symbol of government neglect, two years after Hurricane Katrina. UUSC supported this Native American community in its struggle to return and rebuild. Scores of communities like this have been completely left off the recovery map.*

India Disaster Mitigation Institute (AIDMI), the only civilian group able to access the villages situated in the conflictive area along the Line of Control, separating Pakistani Kashmir from Indian Kashmir, where government and mainstream aid does not reach. In the Gulf Coast, this meant partnering with the Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance to respond to flagrant abuses against immigrants subcontracted to work on cleanup and reconstruction.

### Disaster response

When major disasters strike, such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2005 South Asian earthquake, or the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes, UUSC and the Unitarian Universalist Association launch joint appeals for humanitarian-relief donations. We identify vulnerable groups whose traditional place in society particularly disadvantaged them after the disaster. To support them in their recovery, we build partnerships with local organizations, which have the best knowledge of their communities.

In Thailand, this meant working with a Burmese human-rights group to assist undocumented Burmese migrants being denied government relief. In Indian Kashmir, it meant working with the All-

### Long-term humanitarian crises

Two years into the Rights in Humanitarian Crises Program, UUSC continues its emergency-response work, while building a humanitarian-response program in countries where long-term, complex humanitarian crises persist due to war or repression. Our initial focus is on Burma, Darfur, and Uganda, where UUSC plans to partner with local organizations to find ways to address the special needs of those particularly disadvantaged because of their gender, race, or class.

# Helping Ugandans go home

Over the last 20 years, while the world has chosen to look away, a horrific war in northern Uganda has destroyed the lives of countless people, particularly children. Nearly 2 million people have been uprooted from their homes, forced into squalid temporary camps; scores of villages have been burned to the ground. More damning for the world community, approximately 60,000 children and youth have been kidnapped and conscripted into the largest child army in the world, forced to fight government soldiers and commit atrocities against their own communities and families.

Yet there is a cause for hope as peace talks move forward between the rebel group the Lord's Resistance Army and the Ugandan government. The people of northern Uganda are demonstrating their great desire for peace by moving out of remote IDP camps into temporary camps closer to their villages, where they are cultivating crops in fields long deserted.

UUSC is developing a program to support the internally displaced as they return home, helping them to rebuild their communities in a spirit of reconciliation and peace.



Photo by: Martha Thompson/UUSC

## What you can do

- ▶ Educate yourself: watch *Invisible Children* about Uganda, and *Darfur Diaries* and *The Devil Came on Horseback* about Darfur.
- ▶ Participate in UUSC advocacy campaigns for the Gulf Coast region and Darfur (Drumbeat for Darfur).
- ▶ Volunteer through the UUSC JustWorks Gulf Coast Volunteer Program in New Orleans.
- ▶ Take action to end the genocide in Darfur.
- ▶ Donate to UUSC's Rights in Humanitarian Crises Program.

*Internally displaced people are beginning to leave big camps like Acholibur, moving to satellite camps closer to their home villages as a courageous, hopeful step towards peace.*



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