

# The Long March

Thousands of Sudanese youngsters walked for months and years to freedom... and for some, a new life

by JUDITH KUMIN

Vancouver: a city of tomorrow, a beautiful place of sleek buildings reaching gracefully into a pristine sky, of snow-capped mountains and sparkling Pacific waves. Southern Sudan: a place of constant suffering and death, of gaunt, sticklike figures silhouetted endlessly in single file against huge African skies—images which are seared deeply into the annals of African refugee folklore.

Trying to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable; 23-year-old William Kolong Pioth who, along with tens of thousands of other Sudanese youngsters, spent years wandering, seemingly forever, like biblical nomads across the East African savannah. And then, by a million-to-one chance, by an inexplicable stroke of luck which occasionally intrudes into the lives of some of the world's most desperate people, rescue and a flight to an undreamed-of future in the North American west.

William's story began when his parents and elders of Su-

dan's Dinka tribe decided that he had to be rescued from the civil war then ravaging parts of Africa's largest nation in 1983. The youngster and 300 other Dinka boys, the oldest aged 16, embarked on The Long March to safety. It took him and his companions precisely two months and 24 days to walk 1,000 kilometers to a refugee camp in neighboring western Ethiopia.

Across the vast plains, similar armies of youngsters, Sudan's 'Lost Boys', roamed the countryside, sometimes being recruited by the guerrillas as child soldiers and porters, always searching for a place of safety. Their saga became one of the most infamous stories in refugee history, at the same time a tragedy of huge proportions and a heroic tale of survival.

## ANOTHER LONG MARCH

William was forced to undergo two further Long Marches—"I took my clothes off and walked naked," he remembers. "There were people

killing boys just for their clothes"—until he reached the Kakuma refugee camp in the harsh, semi-arid northern corner of Kenya.

He learned English in a mud-walled refugee school, worked for the Lutheran World Federation, first as a volunteer and later as a social worker earning the equivalent of around \$10 a month until 1997 when a visit by a delegation from the International Olympic Committee and a new pair of Nike shoes changed his life.

He was asked to help organize volleyball and basketball events in the camp and after the visit one delegate sent him a pair of Nikes. "The day those shoes arrived," he recalls, "I was the King."

More good fortune followed. The following year he was chosen by



Some of the many thousands of Sudanese boys on their Long March across the country.

a visiting Canadian immigration official for permanent resettlement and arrived on July 21, 1998.

By any standards, Canada's resettlement program is excellent. The country accepts approximately 7,300 refugees each year, one of only a dozen states to resettle refugees on a regular basis. Thousands of others are sponsored privately. A web of official and private agencies help new arrivals find temporary and then perma-

*The Immigration Service today is "far more professional than just a few years ago, handling applications faster, more equitably and more humanely than at any other time."*

predicament of all. Rounded up for various crimes, they cannot be deported because their home countries, principally Cuba, Laos, Viet Nam and states of the for-

► INS to regularize her position. She was promptly detained as a 'felon' and faces deportation.

"I have been involved in immigration law for 23 years and I have never seen a provision so sweeping," he said. "In my personal opinion, it is absolutely wrong. They are going to have to modify that provision."

There are other alarming individual stories. The New York Times reported the case of Esta Pierre who entered the U.S. on a doctored passport in 1993 from the terror

that was then Haiti and now faces deportation for entering the country with a false ID. Her two children were born in the United States and cannot be deported. Esta Pierre, according to the Times, is one of around 3,000 Haitians faced with the prospect of abandoning their kids if they are deported or taking them along to a very uncertain future.

An estimated 3,000 foreigners find themselves in perhaps the most bizarre



ment accommodation, schooling and jobs.

William flew immediately to Vancouver and moved into a small room at the Welcome House reception center run by the Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia. The group was established in the early 1970s, initially to help Ugandan Asian refugees who had been expelled by Idi Amin, but has continued its work with successive groups of refugee arrivals. From a budget of C\$7 million, provided mainly by the federal and provincial governments, and like other groups across the country, the Society sponsors English language training, child care for mothers attending the classes, job counselling and other services.

Staff helped William find permanent lodging with another Sudanese refugee, but obtaining work is another matter. New arrivals often complain of the 'Canadian Experience' conundrum—employers demand this 'experience' before they will hire, but refugees can't get the experience if they can't get a job. William set to work stocking supermarket shelves to get the 'Canadian Experience.'

There are other criticisms. Nancy Worsfold, Director of the Ottawa-Carlton Immigrant Services Organization, a local group which helps newly arrived refugees, acknowledges that Canada has a good overall record toward refugees compared with other countries, but



**A new home in Vancouver for William.**

lamenting what she considers the authorities' enforcement mentality. As a nation founded on immigration, she believes, Ottawa could increase its resettlement quota. Refugees themselves complain that because of the way the system is structured family reunion is often painfully slow.

The authorities have taken steps to address the concern that Canada has been both extremely slow and selective in choosing resettlement candi-

dates, often going for people with good education or language skills, rather than those in the most immediate need. But starting January 1, 2000, Canada launched an 'urgent protection pilot project' to test its ability to process urgent cases within five days of submission by UNHCR. "We have to respond quickly to refugees overseas who are in most desperate need of protection," Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Elinor Caplan said in launching the project. And the new Immigration and Refugee Protection Act tabled in parliament in April proposes to facilitate family reunion and reduce significantly the traditional emphasis placed on a refugee's ability to settle quickly in Canada, in favor of protection considerations.

Back in Vancouver, William is using the toughness bred on those long marches through the African bush and interminable years in refugee camps to smooth his way through his new life. "Some refugees in Canada don't find it easy," he said. "I'm not worried about myself. I'm at my highest standard (of life) yet. I worry about the others in Kakuma."

And his parents? He has tried unsuccessfully through the Red Cross to find them but "I can't tell you anything about my family," he said. "Even if my mom were sitting right here, I wouldn't recognize her." ■

mer Soviet Union, will not accept them back. Effectively, under current detention policy, they could be detained until they die and have become known as 'the lifers.'

Kathleen Newland of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington said: "Congress had no idea what it was doing in 1996 with things like mandatory detention." The problem is that while the provision remains law, INS Commissioner Doris Meissner said her agency had little discretion in alleviating the situation.

Even when the INS has flexibility, the system is unpredictable according to human rights activists. Regional INS offices retain a large degree of independence and while some directors actively encourage the release of detainees whenever possible, others are known to vigorously discourage the practice.

#### **RELEASE DETAINEES**

UNHCR urged that detainees who are asylum seekers should be released when-

ever possible. Karen AbuZayd, the agency's Regional Representative in Washington, said it was "concerned by the erosion of basic refugee protection principles in the United States because of the 1996 laws" especially detention and lack of access to asylum procedures. "Asylum seekers who are not a threat to society should not be detained and should not be treated like criminals," she said.

When aliens are incarcerated, and their numbers grew rapidly after passage of the ▶

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