

Al Arabiya Producer Nabil Kassem:

Arab media are “living in denial” over Darfur

Interview by Lawrence Pintak

MAY, 2007. *Two years on, Nabil Kassem is still profoundly affected by his experiences in Sudan. Back in 2005, the documentary film maker was given the job of producing a \$50,000 film for Al Arabiya about the crisis in Darfur. What he witnessed there, and recorded in his film, were scenes of unspeakable brutality and untold suffering, scenes he thought would surely wake up an Arab public all too willing to let Darfur pass by. But such was the indictment his film made on the Sudanese government and Arab Janjaweed militias, the final cut of Jihad on Horseback (Jihad ala Al Jiyad) never made it across the airwaves. In this highly charged interview with Co-Editor and Publisher Lawrence Pintak, Kassem speaks of how with the help of a telephone Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir prevented the broadcast of perhaps the most provocative documentary film ever made by an Arab director.*

Pintak: The documentary has been very controversial. Why is that? What is so controversial about covering Darfur for an Arab media outfit?

Kassem: I think it was the testimonies I got in Chad from the refugees. I found a woman holding a baby, she'd been raped. And the baby belonged to one of the Arabic attackers. She told me that this son's father was from the Janjaweed. I found too many pregnant women who'd been raped from the Janjaweed.

Controversial—I don't think it's controversial. I think the Arab countries, especially the Sudanese, who are following the government now, they're not ready to see the truth. What's going on there—it is the truth. You know why? Because if you are an American, and two million of your people are sent away and thrown in the desert with no food and no water, I think there is a problem.

You have to feel. You have to see. You have to say no.

Most of the Arabic—Sudan is Arabic—they are living and denying what is going on in Sudan for the African tribals, and they are Sudanese also.

Pintak: What about Arabs, what about Arab governments and Arab media?

Kassem: They're living in denial also. They don't want to see. I think they thought the conflict is between the African and Arabs there in Darfur. I think they have to know that

the conflict is between one people who hold one identity—all of them are Muslim—and sharing the same religion. The African tribes are Sudanese and they have their Sudanese identity and passports, and the Arab tribes they are also Sudanese.

I think it's a war of race. When I interviewed the ministers there in Sudan and Musa Hilal (the United Nations says he's responsible for genocide there in Darfur), I think they're looking in a way that's not that equal to the Africans, to the Sudanese Africans. So far in the Arab world they don't know that it's our race. It's not an Arab conflict with another African conflict, it's with Arab and African sharing the same land.

There was a genocide there—I saw too many graves. There were so many people who have been buried there.

I saw one million children, old women and men just like this on the desert. You don't know why. And there are no Arabic organizations looking after them. Just Médecins Sans Frontières—a French organization—that is looking after them.

I thought then that maybe there is no justice in the world, I don't know, maybe there is no God in that land. How come you throw a million people like this, like this, like this—whomever you ask why you are doing this, they told you, “Ahh this is not our conflict, this is an American and Israeli conflict, they want I don't know what—there is diamonds here in Darfur, and there is fuel here and petrol and I don't know what.” It's ridiculous. I couldn't believe this. Musa Hilal—you heard about Musa Hilal? Musa Hilal he told me,

“But the government gave me guns to defend our lands.” But I thought, “How is he defending the land by throwing over a million people in the desert and in Chad?” He told me, “You know I have 20 million Arabs under my control?” I told him, “Why don’t you go and make yourself a president of Sudan?” He told me, “I’m thinking of doing this.” And imagine that a criminal like Musa Hilal would be the president of Sudan? They are liars and they are assassins. This is my personal view. This is not related to my station or to me as a journalist, this is my personal view.

Pintak: There’s a terrible line, statement in American newsrooms when African crises come up: “It’s just more flies on black faces,” meaning that it’s only Africans, who cares, it all looks the same. Is part of that what’s going on in the Arab media?

Kassem: I think so, I think so, I think so. Yes. The Arab media—I don’t know why they are denying this crisis as if it doesn’t exist. Omar Al Bashir, when he heard about my movie he started to call the king. I shouldn’t say this—you will publish this. He started to call too many weighty people to just stop this documentary. Because this documentary has testimonies, maybe he will fall down after if they publish it.

After all, after two years after Jihad on Horseback, everybody has started to know that we shouldn’t stand up and just turn our face like there is nothing going on. They have to do something, not analyzing all the time about petrol, about Israel, about America, about invasions from the West. I can’t see now that this is the problem.

The Sudanese government, Omar Hassan Bashir, threw these people on the land, they burned their villages, they raped and killed them for I don't know what—what is the real reason.

Yes, most of the people in the Arab media are looking—this is just another African lost in the desert.

Pintak: Is there a defensiveness that Arabs might be doing this so we don't want to talk about it?

Kassem: Yes I think so, I think so.

But you know this is ridiculous, because the other parties, the Africans, they are Muslims and they live on their lands, it's Dar Al Fur, the land of Al Fur—do you know the real meaning of “Darfur”? “Dar” it means in Arabic, “home”, of Al Fur—Al Fur it's the biggest black tribe in Darfur. So this is their lands—it's named after them.

Pintak: Tell me what happened with the documentary. You produced it, and then?

Kassem: I did direct it and produce it, and then they didn't air it because of too much pressure we cannot resist. We couldn't resist that much pressure on us. So Omar Bashir he told me that because of me I did something not balanced, but you can't be balanced with more than one million people have been thrown away, you can't be balanced. And I

always asked Musa Hilal and this interior minister and I don't know who in Khartoum, "Please give me some documents that proves the Africans did that to the Arabs—burned their villages, killed Arab people, raped Arabic people from your tribe," and they didn't give me. But the African gave me all what they got. All of the documents and the show—real and you can see this in the documentary—you can see with your eyes the proof, the evidence about what the Arab people did to them. And because of this it is not balanced. Because he didn't provide me documents. And he just refused. He's always saying, this is what I know, and this is what I'm telling you and this is the truth. But prove it!

If it is a truth how come there is more than 1 million outside their villages—how come?

Why I didn't find one Arabic from their tribe in the camp? In Chad or in Darfur? Why?

Why there is not one Arabic in any camps, of the camps I visited. I visited all the camps in Chad. Why there is not one Arabic person? Why?

Where are they? Where are they? These Arabic people who the government says that the African expelled them out of their villages? Where are they? Where the graves of these dead people or where the women who have been raped by the African? You can't see.

They will not tell you or they don't exist. They're still in their villages. How come there are two million African outside, and there is not one from the Arabic tribe in a camp?

Think about this!

Two million in front of zero from the Sudanese Arabic. How come? This is unfair. You can't believe this. This is out of logic I think? No, don't you think so?

You've been there? Ok, go and see.

If you see can see one Christian or one Sudanese Arabic there come and tell me. You will not find. All of them are African and Muslims. And there is nobody from the Arabic tribes in the camps or outside their villages.

Pintak: You're very emotional about it obviously.

Kassem: It's not "emotional". When you see two million—most of them are children and nude. What, you'll start to laugh. What will you do?

Pintak: Is it possible for journalists in that situation to remain detached?

Kassem: I cried when I see a group of very small children, some of them were girls and were trying to hide—because they were naked. And they looked at me and just tried to cover this area there. Yes I cried. I cried as a person. But you cannot be not emotional. You cannot be careless when you see people suffering like this. It was raining heavily, and they were sleeping under the rain and I was hiding in the car. So you will start to make a telephone call and to laugh or to what? You will cry, or you will be impressed, or you will be sad or something. At the end of the day we are human. Even I'm a

journalist—we are human. When you see somebody in a group, hundreds of thousands of people, they are suffering—they are suffering and they are too sad. And they suffer from hunger and I don't know what. Maybe it's a conspiracy I don't know what. But the fact is there is two million people outside their villages they are lost in the desert or in the camps. And they are raped. Most of them. Too many of them, of the women are raped. And I saw too many cases—and in Chad. Not in Sudan. You will not know the truth if you go to Sudan. You have to go to Chad. You have to visit the refugee camps in Chad. Not in Sudan, it's worthless. Or you have to go to the liberated part of Darfur who is under the opposition control.

Don't listen to these journalists who went to Al Fashir. The camps in Sudan and the government controls are very strict. Nobody dares to speak there. You cannot hear the misery. You can see it in the eyes. But the refugees couldn't tell because they will beat them, or I don't know stop supplying food to them or something like this. If you want to know the truth just go to Adri in Chad, see these camps, what's going on there. The diseases, the malaria, the hunger, and the children. Who can afford to see children naked?

Pintak: Do you have any hope that it's going to change in terms of Arab attitudes?

Kassem: No I don't have any hope about the Sudanese government because they close it with the Christian in the north, they open in Darfur—they want to be under the spots in

any situation. I don't think there is a hope with the current regime in Khartoum—they have to be dragged to the court.

Pintak: What about Arab pressure. King Abdullah just started talking about Darfur, the Prime Minister of Malaysia was there just the other day as we take this...

Kassem: It's unbearable. Because you know it's a shame when we see Tony Blair stand up or George Bush and say, "Stop this massacre now!" And we are the Arabs, and they are our people turning our face. You cannot hide the whole time—you cannot just turn your face and you don't want to listen, or to hear or to see. There are two million people. I'm always speaking about my personal experience, take it as Nabil Kassem not as from Al Arabiya TV and don't mention my TV. This is my personal view. Because of this I think I'm Darfurian now. Yes. Because there is people who are suffering, and if you can help them by speaking it would be good. And if there were, I don't know, the Philippines who were suffering it would be our job as human beings to tell the truth. To tell what we saw.

I filmed my documentary—it's great, it's cinematic, there are too many testimonies in it. And you can check all that's been undershot is the truth.

You cannot believe three people—the ministry of the interior or the intelligence ministry in Sudan. Or the President of Sudan and I don't know what. Three people—Musa Hilal. You cannot believe them and say that two million people, they are lying.

Pintak: Nabil Kassem, producer and director of Jihad on Horseback, than you very much.