

# Sudan's Lost Boys Find a Home



During their long trek from Sudan, the "lost boys" survived by eating wild leaves.

DEREK HUDSON/CORBIS SYGMA

## Young survivors start a new life in the U.S.

When Peter Wal and David Gai landed in Boston, Massachusetts, one cold March night in 2001, they had no money in their pockets. They didn't even have coats. Gai, 25, remembers staring at the leafless trees, thinking they were dead. "I thought if the trees couldn't survive in this place, how would we?"

Wal and Gai were refugees from the war-torn African country of Sudan. They arrived in Boston after a journey that took nearly 15 years. They've known hunger, exhaustion, terror, and tragedy.

### A JOURNEY BEGINS

In 1987, when Wal was only seven, soldiers attacked his village. He was tending cattle on a nearby field when he noticed a thick cloud of smoke rising from the village. Wal knew instantly that his home had become a casualty of Sudan's long and bloody civil war. "Dead bodies were everywhere," he says.

Wal fled to the east. Soon he joined hundreds of boys between the ages of 4 and 17 whose families had been killed in similar attacks. The other boys had also escaped death because they were tending cattle when their homes were attacked.

Seeking safety, the boys spent months walking barefoot through

wilderness. Along the way, they took care of one another. Still, hundreds died of starvation and disease. Many others were attacked by lions or drowned trying to cross rivers.

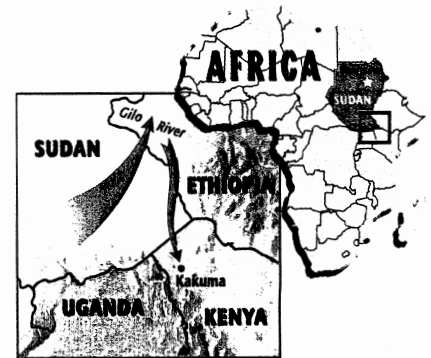
After three months, the exhausted group arrived in Ethiopia, where they settled in a refugee camp. Aid workers called them the "lost boys."

In 1991, war forced the boys out of Ethiopia too. After another long trek, they ended up in a hot, dusty refugee camp in Kenya. There, they built their own mud huts but had no running water or electricity. United Nations (U.N.) workers provided one small meal a day and some schooling. The boys were hungry for both. "I learned that education is the one thing that cannot be taken away, even if there is a war," says Wal.

### COMING TO AMERICA

In 1999, the U.N. and U.S. officials agreed to resettle 3,700 lost boys in the U.S. Now in their teens and 20s, most of the boys have been placed in cities across the U.S.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC), an agency that helps refugees, is helping Wal, Gai, and other Sudanese adjust to life in Boston. Before arriving, the young men went to classes that explained how Americans live.



In Boston, the IRC found apartments for the refugees and gave them food and clothing. At first, it was a difficult adjustment. "We would come to an apartment and find raw meat in the microwave because they had confused it with the fridge," says Stephanie Sluka, an IRC worker.

Most of the refugees took low-paying jobs. But many dream of continuing their education. Wal moved in with a foster family so that he could go to high school. For the first time since he was seven, he had a family. "He is so eager to learn," says his foster father.

Many refugees hope to someday return to the home they only knew as children. Armed with educations, they want to help rebuild their broken country. "They call us lost boys, but we are not really lost," says Wal. "We know where we came from and where we want to go."