

Mohamed Yahya is a refugee from the Darfur region of Sudan and is the founder and Executive Director of Damanga Coalition for Freedom and Democracy. From 1995 to 2005, he was Chairman and spokesman of the Representatives of the Massaleit Community in Exile, which was the first human rights group to alert the international community to human rights abuses in western Sudan. Mr. Yahya was born in a small village east of Al-Geneina, the capital of Darmassaleit (West Darfur state). Both as a child and adult, he experienced the brutal racism that permeates Sudanese society. In 1993, his village witnessed the first attacks of the Sudanese government's Arab militia raiders, known as janjaweed. Yahya's home was completely decimated and most of his relatives and neighbors were shot, raped, or burned alive in their huts.

Yahya was studying at Al-Azhar University in Cairo at the time his village was destroyed. He received word that his parents were safe, but he lost 21 other family members. He subsequently began to receive firsthand reports of the terrible crimes that were being committed by the Sudanese government and its proxy force, the janjaweed.

It quickly became apparent to Yahya that Sudan's ruling regime was engaged in a campaign to rid western Sudan of its black African ethnic population. Yahya and other Sudanese students living in Cairo sought to alert the international community to the humanitarian crisis that had begun to unfold.

In 1995, they formed the Representatives of the Massaleit Community in Exile (RMCE). The RMCE's founding members came from many different ethnic Sudanese backgrounds including the Massaleit, Fur, Dajo, Zagawa, Bargo, Gimir, Tama, Berty, Barno, and Meme, in addition to people from the Nuba Mountains, southern Sudan and elsewhere.

Believing that the pen is mightier than the sword, the RMCE sought to protect the people of Darfur through peaceful means, including advocacy and public education. With no financial resources, Yahya and other members of the RMCE began this work by writing reports and circulating them on foot to all the international embassies in Cairo. Their first major open letter to the international community, "The Hidden Slaughter and Ethnic Cleansing in Western Sudan," was distributed this way in 1999.

Over the next couple of years it was widely referenced by the United Nations General Assembly and Secretary-General Kofi Annan, along with organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. In this way, Yahya and other members of the RMCE were the first people to awaken the world to the unfolding genocide in Darfur.

Between 1999 and 2003, working in Cairo with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Yahya and the RMCE were also able to sponsor more than 20,000 refugees from various parts of Sudan. They helped ensure that nearly 95% of the people fleeing Sudan received political asylum and resettlement in Europe, Canada, Australia and the United States.

In 2002, fearing reprisal from the Sudanese government for his humanitarian and advocacy work, Yahya sought political asylum in the United States. After his relocation to Charlottesville, Virginia, Yahya founded Damanga Coalition for Freedom and Democracy, in order to continue and expand on the work of the RMCE.

Mohamed is a nominee of the 2010 Dan David Pulitzer Prize award.



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Topics:

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