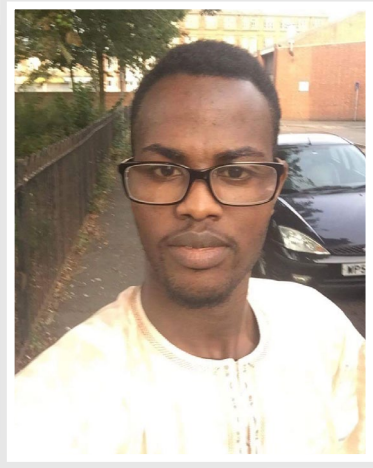


El Sadiq 'Debay' Manees



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When Debay was a child, government militia attacked his village in Darfur. He spent years living in a refugee camp and moving around Sudan. In 2015, he was forced to flee when he was arrested and condemned to death.



'I hope there will truly be peace and people stop killing each other - we have to solve the problems and build a country which treats people equally. People shouldn't be killed for their personal beliefs.'

El Sadiq 'Debay' Mahmoud Manees was born in January 1990 in a village in north west Darfur, bordering Chad and Libya. He had a happy, peaceful childhood, attending the village school with his siblings.

In 1999, he noticed his parents were worried and there was talk of conflict. Darfur, a region in western Sudan, includes different ethnic groups and tribes, and a mix of Arabs and black Africans. The government, led by Omar al-Bashir, was accused of racism against black Africans and pursuing Arab nationalist policies. In the early 2000s, ethnic tensions were building. Tribes such as the one Debay belonged to accused the government of discrimination against Darfur's non-Arab citizens. The government responded with disproportionate violence and oppression.

The violence first reached Debay's village in 2002 when his teachers, including his uncle, were murdered, accused of being 'Zionists' or 'Israeli spies' working against Islam. The Sudanese regime was deeply antisemitic, and this false accusation was often made to justify violence and arrests. Some months later the soldiers returned: this time, Debay witnessed them commit murders.

'My mom told me "if these people see your dad, he will be killed like your uncle Mahadi and your teacher Tom". I asked why, did they commit any crime? She said, "Your dad is accused to be Zionist because he refused to be a government soldier".'

Debay's school closed as the arrests continued. His teachers were either jailed or sent to fight for government forces in the civil conflict in the region which would later become the independent country of South Sudan.

In 2003, the situation escalated in Darfur. The government was arming militia known as the *Janjaweed* to attack black African villages and groups perceived to be supporting rebels. In Debay's village, they burnt down buildings, including his school, and killed livestock. Villagers fled to the mountains where they hid for five months before returning, but in December 2003 they were attacked again. Debay says 'I saw death, bodies and blood everywhere. I fled with my sister to the mountains, and we moved West. People were crying, because they had lost everything.'

After walking for three days, they reached Chad. They heard that everyone in the village was killed, animals were stolen, houses were burned and water sources were buried. Debay had been separated from his mother and brother, and lost hope. They were reunited three weeks later, but his mother was distraught: most of her family, including her mother, had been murdered. Millions of people were displaced in Darfur during this time. Debay's father found the family living with thousands of others in a refugee camp in Eastern Chad, where his mother worked as a teacher.

In 2006, Debay went to stay with family in East Darfur to study. However, he faced discrimination – he achieved top grades but was denied a place at a free school. Nonetheless, three years later he was accepted to study pharmacy at university in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. During his studies, Darfuri students were accused of 'Zionist' activism, and were forced either to work for government intelligence services or leave. Debay returned to his family in the refugee camp, where he started teaching.

In 2014, his father told him he wished to return to Sudan, as he did not want to die in the camp after spending so many years there. With his father, Debay travelled to the mountains near their village where some people had been hiding from government troops. He worked as a teacher there, helping the local children. They did not live in peace for long. In January 2015 they were attacked and fled to a nearby city – but days later Debay was arrested with a group of men. His captors threatened his family with sexual violence to force him to confess to fabricated accusations that he was a 'rebel' and 'American spy'. Many women in Sudan have been subjected to sexual violence, although little is known about the true scale. Like many others, Debay was forced to confess, to protect his family.

Condemned to death for his 'crimes', Debay was taken to jail where he waited to be killed in a cell with eight people sharing one bed. After two weeks one of his uncles came and said he would pay to have him freed, but that he would have to leave the country and it would not be safe for him to return. His bribe worked – the commander took Debay and drove for hours into a rural area, where they left him. He walked for days before finding a truck carrying animals, on which he travelled to the border with Libya. He later found out that his uncle was murdered for helping to free him.

In Libya, life was very hard for Debay. He was exploited, working for months without being paid. Feeling desperate and alone, he made an agonising decision.

'I chose to go across the Mediterranean Sea – hoping either to be able to live in peace, or to die.'

Debay was luckier than many others who attempt the journey. He was rescued and taken to Italy, where he slept rough. He had a long and difficult journey through Europe, unable to find work or safety, until he eventually reached the UK where he claimed asylum.

In 2019 al-Bashir's government was overthrown in a revolution. Debay hoped this would bring change, but said 'the regime is the same, just with different people. They are still treating some people as lesser and targeting them'. It is still not safe for him to return, but he has hope for the young people of Sudan:

'There are people still in the camps with no hope and young people who don't have access to education. I hope they can study. I want young people to learn to fight for their rights, not with guns but by reading books.'

Today, Debay lives in the UK, and was a key worker during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. He is grateful to be safe, but wishes he could be with his family in Sudan. He says, 'Still my heart is in my village and the refugee camps with those I left in Darfur.'

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