

## Be Their Voice

Washington, DC

July 26, 2007

### ***"Who are these people?"***

Those were the words this stranger asked me as we stood in Lafayette Park in front of the White House in Washington, DC. She was taking note of the 120 + people excitedly readying themselves for the rally we were soon to begin in support of the Saharawi people. The sound system was being tweaked on the small stage, U.S. flags and flags of Western Sahara were being disseminated to the participants, and packets of flyers containing information to be used to introduce on-lookers to the Saharawi and their cause were being passed out. Eleven Saharawi children and their two Saharawi translators who had been spending the summer with families in the Fox Valley of Wisconsin were excitedly donning their traditional dress and practicing their presentations. None of us had ever done this before, and the wonder of being in the heart of our nation's capitol for this long-awaited opportunity seemed surreal.

"We're here to support a refugee people group of North Africa..." She cut in with an insistent, "No...no...Who ARE you people? What organization is this?" I explained that we were from churches in Wisconsin, Michigan, North Carolina and Oklahoma, here to bring exposure to the refugees of Western Sahara. She told me that she walks through the park everyday on her lunch hour, and often sees demonstrations going on. But this one was strikingly different to her. "Usually there is such an atmosphere of anger, hostility, and negativity. It's almost scary. But this group....I can almost tangibly feel such hope...such peace... such a positive atmosphere spreading in this whole park. It's so rare. It's such an art for people to stand for a cause and yet be so positive and hopeful about it! This is amazing. This is wonderful."

What a great beginning to a very eventful day. As the music began from our little stage, people from DC as well as visitors from other countries moved in to see what was going on. Adding to the number were several government dignitaries and representatives of organizations that have supported the Saharawi throughout the years, who each took a few moments to speak to the crowd of their experience, perspective and support of the refugees. Several of the children read messages they had written expressing their realities, hopes, and requests of our government to help bring about a just solution to their people's 32 years in exile in the Sahara Desert refugee camps. These Junior Ambassadors did a beautiful job of representing their people and being their voice on one of our country's most historical sites'

As the hour drew to an end, we joined our voices together in songs that drew our hearts and eyes heavenward to the God of Justice who cares so much for these forgotten people of the desert. From our hearts of love for the Saharawi, united cheers began to ring out for them. The crowd of Christ Followers closed in tighter around the children, and suddenly, the voices rising above all others were those of the children...in their own language, crying out for freedom. Erupting from somewhere deep within their souls poured an emotion that none of us had ever seen or felt before. Their words they had learned from their people. But the emotion was their own. It silenced us. All we could do was stand with them, silently letting their unspeakable pain cause our own tears and prayers to flow for them....with them...as their lifetime of living under such great injustice became tangible to our ears and eyes. We were

deeply moved....sobered by the reality we were experiencing through the vulnerable expressions pouring from the children. This was a raw reality God was letting us see. Injustice is not just a word....not just a concept....not just something that happens to lots of people in far-away places. Injustice is real. It is cruel. It is evil. It is unrelenting in its damage to the souls of those who must live with it. It creates a depth of hopelessness that we who have not experienced it can never understand. But in those moments we were given a glimpse of its effect, and we will never forget.

As the children began to quiet, our time in the park drew to an end by joining together in prayer for the Saharawi people. It had been an amazing experience for all of us, and we sensed God's smiling presence and blessing for having joined Him in His heart for justice for those who have been abandoned, betrayed and forgotten in this world.

Next, the children and some of the group leaders made their way to the gates of the White House, with about 700 letters that we had brought from children in the refugee camps....handwritten and including pictures many of them had drawn, asking our President to know who they are and to help them to return to their homeland of Western Sahara. As one of the White House staff met us at the gate, he was greeted by the children and soon had possession of a precarious stack of letters reaching from his waist to his chin. Assuring us that he would deliver them to the President, he disappeared back through the gate and the children proceeded to take lots and lots of pictures of themselves with the White House behind them.

The afternoon was filled with the entire group of 120+ trip participants and the children spreading out on Capitol Hill to meet with as many Senators and Congressmen as we could, introducing them to the Saharawi people and cause, and asking for their support in bringing an end to their exile from their homeland. We met in offices, reception rooms, and literally "in the *halls* of Congress" to speak with as many as we could. Many good connections were made that day, and the cause of the Saharawi people took a big step forward in the awareness of our leaders in Washington. For most, if not all of us, it was an important learning experience of finding our own voices to speak to our representatives about issues that truly matter, realizing what a privilege we have in this country to be able to freely stand for causes in which we believe.

That evening, we all gathered together once again on Capitol Hill for a reception to which Senators and Congressmen and their staff had been invited. The stately room was prepared with several linen covered tables laden with platters of hors de voers being served by waiters in tuxedos. Soon the room was completely full, standing room only, with many from the offices we had visited that day as well as our team and the children. As people enjoyed the light banquet, they mingled and chatted amiably...politicians, staffers, some of their spouses and children, diplomats, team members and Saharawi.

The crowd was brought to attention to hear from a good number of Congressmen and representative staffers who had joined us, hearing of their support for the Saharawi and of their appreciation of the renewed purpose the day's focus had brought to their situation and need for resolution. As the hour went on, some Congressmen who had been in session "on the floor" came to join us and add their words of support. We later learned that one of the Congressmen in attendance had returned to the floor and encouraged others to drop in on the reception that was going on. Again, several of the children read their personal messages, and were met with

enthusiastic applause and encouragement. Prayer for the Saharawi began and concluded the event.

As the crowd dispersed, there was again that sense of having joined God in the work He is doing with and for our dear people of the desert. The children, still excited from the day's events (and all the bounty of sweet treats that had filled the tables but now filled their stomachs) headed to the metro with their poor, dragging chaperones to begin their trek back to the church on the outskirts of DC that had lovingly housed and fed them for the week. The rest of the team headed to the buses and vans....some to make their way back to North Carolina, and the rest to the beautiful country home and hosts that had so graciously and generously housed and fed over 70 "strangers" from Wisconsin and Michigan during this foray into Washington on behalf of some little-known people group somewhere in North Africa.

Since that memorable day, we have heard reports from many directions of the impact these people of faith made in Washington. Scores of conversations took place with a wide array of people... many from the political world, DC residents who took note of these visitors who wore shirts that proclaimed "Be Their Voice" and wanted to know "Whose voice?" The people in Lafayette Park from DC, Germany, Italy, Australia, and elsewhere who wanted the brochures and gave their words of encouragement for what we were doing, including a lawyer who had noticed this unique group through his office window. He had to come down to find out what was going on.....church people and Muslim kids waving some unrecognizable country flag and singing songs....??? The following week a letter went out from some key Congressmen and Senators to their Congressional and Senatorial colleagues asking for their signatures of support on behalf of the Saharawi's right to determine their future.....a rare bi-partisan effort that crossed the political boundaries that normally divide the issues and politicians.

There was even a phone call from the camps, from the Saharawi principal of our English School there. He said that as he walks from his home to the school now, he is stopped by people all along the way saying they know what the Christians in America are doing for them in Washington, and that they are very grateful. He feels proud to be associated with our "organization."

For those of us who went it was a time of following where He asked us to go in a brand new way. And He met us there, granting us the grace needed to rub shoulders with strangers, government leaders, and fellow Followers of Christ. He was in the heart of our nation's capitol, giving us the courage to step onto new ground in a world that we have largely seen from a distance, speaking with people with whom we'd never envisioned being in the same room. He met us in the outskirts, where we experienced His great care and provision for us as we were fed and housed by people we did not know, but who served us out of hearts that were clearly committed to following His Voice with all they have and all they are. We caught a sense of being His co-laborers in being moved to act on behalf of those who have no voice, of widows and orphans, of the foreigners, of the poor and the abandoned.

And we know His Spirit within us continues to speak to our own hearts about the people of the camps that He at this moment is moving amongst, while at the same time moving in the minds and hearts of those with whom we came in contact in DC. His Spirit is taking our "pebble drop in the pond" and creating ripples that will widen and move in ways we may never know, just as He has throughout the years of following His footsteps whether here or in the desert.

*"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice,  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free,  
and break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter –  
when you see the naked, to clothe him,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"*

*"Then, ... your light will break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing will quickly appear;  
then your righteousness will go before you,  
the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.  
Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;  
You will cry for help, and He will say:  
'Here am I.'"*

*Isaiah 6-9*

**For more information and a transcript of the rally and reception held in Washington DC on July 26<sup>th</sup>, please check out our web site at [www.betheirvoice.org](http://www.betheirvoice.org).**

We have come to our nation's capitol today for one reason: To demonstrate our love and support for a people we have each come to know and love, a people who changed each of our lives as a result of knowing them: The Saharawi people. They are one of the longest-standing refugee situations in the world today, yet have been largely ignored by the world for over 32 years...including our own country of the United States.

Each of you who have come here today represent hundreds if not thousands of Americans who have met the Saharawi people of North Africa within the last 8 years. We have walked the sands of the Sahara Desert with them, we have been welcomed into their refugee tents, we have played with their children, and shared their rations and tea. We have experienced the 130 degree heat that is part of their daily lives. We have heard their stories, shared their laughter and joy, cried tears for those who have no tears left to cry. We have experienced their open hearts and arms...a Muslim nation willing to not only welcome us into their refugee homes, but have unreservedly and lovingly welcomed us – who are followers of Christ – into their hearts.

We have heard their memories of their homeland of Western Sahara, and their dreams of returning to their homes and families from whom they were separated by war so many years ago. We have tasted of their deep frustration and bewilderment with a world that has chosen to ignore their injustice. We have glimpsed the deep, unspeakable pain of a peaceful people whose souls have been profoundly wounded by the broken promises and betrayal of nations and world organizations that have chosen to look the other way and leave them to devise their own means to survive in one of the most uninhabitable places on earth.

And they have survived...against all odds. And through their survival, they have become an example to the world. They have chosen peace. They have chosen to treasure and protect their identity as the Saharawi people. They have chosen to sacrifice their own personal needs for the greater cause of their people. They have somehow been able to hold onto hope that someday, some way, there will arise voices that will speak for them....that will tell the truth of these forgotten people of the desert...that will speak to our nation, and that the conscience of our nation will be moved to act for the cause of justice on their behalf.

And that is why we've come. We are willing to be their voice until they can have a voice of their own in our nation....in our world. And with our voices we ask today that our nation will come to the aid of the Saharawi people, who continue to suffer impossible conditions in the Sahara Desert of North Africa. We ask that Humanitarian organizations will assist with food, medicines and water. We ask our nation's leaders to look at the injustice that has been prolonged by ignoring and abandoning the Saharawi people's 32-year exile from their homeland of Western Sahara. We ask our President to honor the shining example of the Saharawi people, a Muslim nation in exile, who have chosen peaceful action, democracy and to

value each individual – man, woman, and child – in their society as a person of dignity and worth. They have taught us much, and their example has much to teach the world.

Please see them. Please hear them. Please do something to make the wrong right.

Thank you all for taking the time to come this evening as we focus our attentions on the people of Western Sahara - the Saharawi people. Most of you in this room have taken time from your normal American lives to give of yourselves, your abilities, your resources and your compassion on behalf of the Saharawi. Many of you have gone, at your own expense, to visit the refugee camps in the Sahara Desert of Algeria. You've tasted of their life.....stayed with families in their tents, shared conversation, laughter, and tears. Many, many of you have been the sick visitor, and experienced the tender compassion and care of people who know what it is like to suffer with no medical remedy except for the soothing touch of a gentle hand patting yours, as those dark eyes look deeply into your soul...and accept you into their hearts.

The Saharawi have given us so much....

They have taught us the beauty of saying "us" rather than "me";

The richness of "ours" instead of "mine."

They have embodied hospitality.....no matter how inconvenient or strange we've been, nor what insane time of the night we've been delivered to their tent with our overstuffed, ridiculous piles of baggage filled with all our "my" stuff.

They have unsettled us with their incredible perceptiveness, an ability to look into our eyes and see who we really are – good or bad – in a way we've seldom known in our own protected little worlds.

They have shown us what it means to be generous...people who have so very little but lavish all they have on us, withholding nothing....expecting nothing in return.

They have expressed their faith and devotion to Allah before us, while respecting and accepting our differing beliefs in a way that often puts our western form of Christianity to shame.

They have taught us through their very lives what really matters in life: family, relationships, spending time with each other, holding loosely to all we have, to cling to hope no matter how hopeless a situation seems, and that God is just as present in the desert among their tents as He is in our comfortable, safe church buildings in our own hometowns.

They have given us so much....they have enriched our lives so greatly....they have put such trust and hope in us....that we, living in this great nation – the United States of America - will tell our country about them. And if our leaders and the people of our nation would know about them and their dire situation, they would surely do something to help to make it right. To bring justice to this long injustice under which they have suffered. They have placed such hope in us...and that we will somehow be a part of their solution....that we can help turn this around....that all they have sacrificed to remain a people...a small nation, with their own identity, culture, language, and contributions they long to share with the world will at last be given the opportunity to have the fundamental human rights to live as a free people in the homeland of their

ancestors. They cling to fading hope that their 32 years of exile will be worth all the sacrifices they have made for the sake of who they are, and where they belong.

And for whatever reason, we who have crossed paths with the Saharawi people now have the responsibility – and privilege – to be their voice in our nation, in our communities, in our neighborhoods and in our families. We come from Wisconsin, Michigan, Iowa, Florida, Arizona, California, Hawaii, South Carolina, North Carolina, Maryland, Texas, North Dakota, Oregon, Washington, and Tennessee. We have experienced the Saharawi, and we know what is true, we know what is right, .... we've seen with our own eyes and heard with our own ears. And we must tell their story to anyone who will listen, until, at last, truth and justice rises above complacency, ignorance, selfish ambition, greed and corruption. Their story is a story worth telling. It's a story the world needs to not only hear, but experience. Don't leave it up to "somebody else".....you have a voice, you have personal experience, and you have available all the resources you've been given by God. Use it all. Because when you use what you've been given for the cause of justice, for the poor, for the foreigner, for the widows and children, you touch on a very tender part of God's heart – the God of Justice, all compassionate, all merciful, all powerful. And when we join our hands together, and align our hearts and purposes with His, we can be confident that the impossible will begin to move into the realm of the possible.....and that Justice, Truth, and Hope will rise above the wrongs of this world. May we hold dearly to this truth for our beloved Saharawi.