

# Students hear firsthand tales of mass killing

By JOSIE HUANG, Staff Writer Friday, May 11, 2007



Jack Milton/Staff Photographer

Ekhlas Anmea asks a question Thursday during a panel discussion at a forum called Confronting Genocide: A Portland Youth Forum, held at the Sheraton Tara Hotel in South Portland.

SOUTH PORTLAND, MAINE - Over the last school year, Charlie Hood has studied diligently about genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia and Herzegovina in his humanities class at Casco Bay High School in Portland.

In a conference on genocide Thursday at the Sheraton Hotel, he sparred with other 10th-graders about whether the United States should lead interventions in countries that violate human rights.

He said no lesson, however, matched the experience of hearing about the horrors of systematic, mass killings from Thursday's panel of Portland community members who have been touched by it.

From Cambodian refugee Pirun Sen, he learned what it was like to fall asleep every night under the Khmer Rouge regime and worry about surviving until the next morning.

He heard Mansour Ahmed, who emigrated from Sudan three years ago, describe his frustration with the international community's inability to stop the unchecked killing of local tribe members by militias linked to the government.

He discovered Gerard Kiladjan's efforts to raise awareness about the Armenian genocide of 1915 and have the Turkish government accept responsibility for it.

"It's one thing to read about it in your book," said Hood, 16, "but going to something like this and hearing people who lived it is a different thing. It's opened up my eyes a little bit more and put a face to the stuff we're studying all year."

**Thursday's event, "Confronting Genocide: A Portland Youth Forum," was organized by the Auburn-based KIDS Consortium, which works with schools across New England to create projects that encourage students to confront real challenges in their communities.**

Human rights have been a yearlong topic for sophomores at Casco Bay High School, a two-year-old expeditionary learning program housed at the Portland Arts and Technology High School.

Students have viewed films on human rights violations in Cambodia and put on a photography-and-writing show at the SALT Gallery, featuring Portlanders who have come from countries with human rights crises. Hood, an aspiring filmmaker, said he plans to work with other students on a film using materials from the exhibit.

The Thursday event gave students a chance to talk to panelists, who included Ahmed's wife, Zhara Suliman, a fellow member of the Fur Cultural Revival of New England, a Portland-based group of refugees from Sudan's Darfur region; and Wells Staley-Mays, a local activist and historian with Peace Action Maine who helped convince the Maine State Retirement System to drop investments in companies doing business in Sudan.

With relatives living in southern Sudan, Marcy Angelo was particularly desperate to figure out what she could do to stop the slaughter of civilians. "Clearly, they don't want us there and will continue to kill our people," she said.

"First off," Ahmed said, "keep telling others that there is something against human beings in Sudan. Tell everybody, make conferences, go anywhere, make e-mails, telephone."

Hope rang through some of the questions the students posed.

Turning to Zhara Suliman, Kristina Madjerac asked, "I was wondering if after the genocide is over and your country begins to rebuild yourself, would you want to go back to your country?"

Suliman, dressed in a bright green scarf and shirt, managed a smile. "I absolutely want to go back," she said, explaining that her relatives are in Sudan. "But first of all, I want this war to stop and this genocide to stop."

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