

PAOLO PELLEGRIN DARFUR WITNESS

STORY BY SARAH COLEMAN

Photojournalists these days face an almost impossible task. In a culture saturated by images, with a 24-hour news cycle in which a Hollywood actor's eating disorder is bigger news than an African famine, they must make us care about intricate, difficult problems. A war halfway across the world, fought by groups with baffling causes. A five-year-old orphan, mutilated and abandoned. Who wants to dwell on such matters? It's so much easier to look away, tune out, focus on the latest Steve Carrell movie or iPod upgrade.

Paolo Pellegrin's images challenge us not only to look but to stay, think, and respond. Remarkably, they do this by getting beyond the sensational aspects of the stories he covers. In these images there are no hacked-off limbs, no brutal executions — instead, Pellegrin picks out quiet, contemplative moments in the middle of conflict zones, and depicts them with a rare visual poetry. Raw, impressionistic, full of mystery and shadows, his images are like stills from our dreams. Bypassing our brains, they find a direct route to our guts and hearts.

The crisis in Darfur, western Sudan, has drawn Pellegrin back several times. One of the few photojournalists who's persisted in the face of the Sudanese government's open hostility, Pellegrin has brought back a stunning collection of images. At various camps, through rain and sandstorms, he's captured the essence of what it means to be a refugee, uprooted from one's past and uncertain of the future. "For many of these people there is no turning back, no going home," he says. "They're in limbo."

In April, Human Rights Watch will publish *Darfur: Smallest Witnesses*, in which Pellegrin's images are printed alongside harrowing drawings made by children in Sudanese refugee camps. Supervised by Human Rights Watch investigators, the children were given paper and crayons but no instructions on what to depict. Their drawings — of villages burned, women raped, gunshots to the face — are beyond heartrending, especially when contrasted with Pellegrin's soulful photographs. "These kinds of drawings, in which a child uses a pencil to describe his demons, are very powerful documents," Pellegrin says. "They're very true, unrefined, and raw."

Sudan. Guantánamo. Iran. Gaza. Like most of his colleagues in the prestigious Magnum photographers' agency, Pellegrin spends most of his days on assignment, moving from one global hot spot to another. Just as important as the physical journey is the emotional road he travels, one that takes him deeper and deeper into the human psyche. "I'm always looking for a bridge, a place where I can connect to what is in front of me," he says. "What I'm interested in is the way photography allows me to encounter someone else."

The images he makes speak to our common humanity. They challenge us to question a status quo that allows for political apathy over Darfur and other global tragedies. They do this not by hectoring us and playing on our guilt, but instead by gently conveying the nuances behind the headlines. Quietly, they whisper to us: Look. Think. Respond. ○



All images Courtesy of Paolo Pellegrin / Magnum Photos.









