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Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (PANA) - At a time when Africa is engaged in a protracted search for peace in Darfur, personal determination and visionary humanitarian values have led an American lady to open a front line that is quickly bringing fresh hopes to refugees from the bloodied region of western Sudan.

Grim images of Darfurian women and children, forcefully driven from their homes by brutal gunmen and now sheltered in isolated blistering camps in neighbouring Chad, moved Rachel Andres to start what has turned out as an award-winning project focused on saving lives, women's dignity and the environment.

Andres, apparently an advocate of solar energy, says: "You can work with energy from the sun every day. It's free. It's a wonderful way to protect our resources. It's a new kind of technology that can transform the people's lives and empower women."

It was not the absence of the usual home comforts but the lack of security for the refugee women and girls whenever they went out of the camps to fetch firewood that pushed Andres to set her heart on the Solar Cooker Project (SCP).

Scarcity of firewood in the vicinity of Iridimi refugee camp, near the Chad/Sudan border, forced women to trek long distances in the vast desert to collect twigs for cooking fires on the traditional three-stone stoves.

According to a recent evaluation, the risk of violence and attacks against female refugees by lustful rapists has drastically been cut down since the launch of the project about two years ago.

As witnessed and recorded in conflict areas across Africa, women have been used as a weapon in killing civilians.

Rebels use rape as a strategy of terrorising, degrading and humiliating people and it is extremely rare that the abuse of women is dealt with as a court case.

Of the 17,000 residents of the camp, 80 percent are women and children.

The amazing outcome of the SCP is that it has, within a short span of time, brought their lives to a turning point as the trips to forage for firewood have dropped by 86 percent.

"We had a meeting with men in the refugee camps and they were very supportive of the project. They show pride in what the women and their

daughters have learnt about the use of solar energy," Andres told PANA in an interview from her home in Los Angeles, US.

This little change, however, does not mean that practices and customs in the society have changed overnight.

It is just the first step toward the empowerment of the women refugees so that they can make further gains in the economic, social and political life of their community and, eventually, play their rightful role in the Darfur peace process.

Indeed, the SCP has built a bridge of respect, love and empowerment that now connects the once hapless victims of conflict with other people around the 'magic' stoves.

Thanks to the project, the refugee women spend less time in kitchens, their health has markedly improved and the delicate environment is getting a chance for renewed freshness.

Andres' project has come at a time when global climate change calls for mitigation strategies to reduce the risk of very damaging and potentially irreversible impacts on ecosystems, societies and economies.

Because of her sympathy for the refugee women in the heartland of Africa, many of them destitute and abandoned mothers with young children, Andres heeded the maxim of her Jewish ancestors that tells everybody: Do not stand idly by in the face of the suffering of others.

To this saying one would add: No matter how far away they may be, care for them. And that's exactly what she did.

"My hope is that the project will bring to life all the issues about women empowerment, security and respect as well as environment protection for the rest of the world to take appropriate actions," said Andres.

Inadequate access to energy for domestic use across rural Africa also exacerbates poverty in the same way as the lack of other social services such as water, education and sanitation.

But, worse still, it is the leading cause of destruction of the natural capital where local communities and authorities have failed to take the initiative of conserving the land and maintaining the integrity of natural ecosystems.

Andres will be awarded the 2008 Charles Bronfman Prize on 6 May for her visionary humanitarian efforts to improve the lives of thousands of Darfur's female survivors.

Before fleeing from Sudan, the refugees may have had little in common, but now through the SCP of Andres they find themselves forming an enduring alliance to struggle for their emancipation.

"Judges who picked Anders for the prize were extremely moved by this project because it demonstrated the kind of role model we needed," Jeffrey Solomon, one of the trustees of the Prize, told PANA.

Nominations for the prize this year had come from 16 countries and Andres won because her work has shown that creativity can often solve problems, Solomon added.

A cash award of US\$100,000 accompanies the prize to celebrate the vision and talent of an individual or team less than 50 years of age, whose humanitarian work has contributed significantly to the betterment of the world.

Andres, 45, led the team of Jewish World Watch that launched the SCP and her expectation is that similar projects would take off in 12 refugee camps in Chad within two to three years.

Besides the project's positive impact on the environment, Solomon appreciated the way it created some economic independence of refugees.

This is an important aspect, especially for women who, even in time of peace, suffer discrimination because of culture and policies that are not sensitive to their particular needs.

"The issue of Darfur is a big challenge. It's a big challenge for Sudan itself. It's a big challenge for the international community," said Abdoulie Janneh, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa.

While the search for peace in Darfur goes on slowly on a roadmap that all stakeholders, including the African Union and the UN, believe is clear and credible, Andres has taken an exemplar lead to stop what could turn out as an extended conflict over the environment.

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