

Lakers forward Ira Newble takes stand on Darfur conflict

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LOS ANGELES - The children drew pictures of women with babies being shot in the back by soldiers, of helicopters and planes dropping bombs.

Those pictures and the faces of the children who drew them remain sharp in the mind of Ira Newble, the Los Angeles Lakers forward who visited two refugee camps in Chad last August and heard stories from victims of the deadly conflict in Sudan's Darfur region.

"They watched their family members being shot. They drew what they saw," Newble said. "It was emotional. What helped me keep my emotions under control was the fact that these kids' spirits were still high. I couldn't believe it. Maybe it was because they were excited to see a refreshing face."

Newble, a seldom-used reserve on a Lakers team playing in the NBA finals, has become one of the most outspoken athletes in drawing attention to Darfur. An estimated 400,000 people have been killed and more than 2.5 million displaced in the last five years, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Newble knew very little before reading a newspaper account in February 2007, while playing for the Cleveland Cavaliers. That was just the beginning for the 33-year-old Detroit native, who learned that China is a major trading partner and a supplier of weapons to the Sudanese government.

That summer he travelled to Africa to witness the devastation himself. Newble said one camp had about 20,000 refugees, the other about 25,000. There were many more camps in Darfur, some with as many as 100,000 refugees.

"The lack of food, water, shelter. I felt horrible and almost powerless," Newble said. "There's so many people, you want to help everybody, but you can't."

He spoke with some of the women and was told horrific tales of being kept for weeks by members of the militia, called the Janjaweed, and being raped every night by 10 to 20 soldiers.

"I was surprised at how strong these women were and able to tell their stories," he said. "They want the world to know what's happened to them."

Government troops and militia units have been battling rebels opposed to a government they say persecutes the non-Arab population. The militia units, believed to be government-funded, have targeted civilians.

Newble has been joined by several NBA players in bringing attention to Darfur, including teammates Kobe Bryant, Derek Fisher, Luke Walton, Trevor Ariza and Andrew Bynum.

Along with Steve Nash, Baron Davis, Tracy McGrady, Matt Barnes and Emeka Okafor, those players have made public service announcements about Darfur that can be seen at the Web site aidstillrequired.org.

"It's devastating to know of the atrocities Darfur has faced," Nash said. "Using a little of my time to help those in dire need and heighten the awareness of the situation so the innocent in Darfur can have a better life is the least I can do."

Hunter Payne, who founded Aid Still Required with his wife, Andrea, contacted the NBA players and produced the videos.

"This is just the beginning," Payne said. "We're moving on to athletes in other sports."

Activist actress Mia Farrow, who plans to make her 10th trip to Darfur this summer, called Newble "a man of conscience."

"It gives me hope when I see somebody like Ira," she said. "Out of nowhere, there's this basketball player who does a phenomenal thing. He's doing his utmost to bring an end to the suffering he's witnessed."

Beijing will host the Olympics in August, and while Newble isn't necessarily in favour of a boycott, he wants the world to know what's going on.

"I just want to focus on trying to get as many of the Olympians to figure out how we can show some form of solidarity at the Olympics without disrespecting the games," he said.

Newble said his inspiration came in part from former athletes like Muhammad Ali, Arthur Ashe, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Russell, Jim Brown, Tommie Smith and John Carlos.

"In 1968, Tommie Smith and John Carlos used the Olympics as a platform," Newble said. "In hindsight today, they're heroes for what they did."

Newble, whose website is mybeaware.org, said he might go to Darfur again this summer.

"The one thing that's been missing from different political and social issues was athletic presence," he said.

Newble said former teammate LeBron James wanted to take a role in getting other Olympic athletes involved.

"I don't always talk about this in the locker room or pressure guys," Newble said. "My focus first is doing my job and winning a championship. I have to take my hat off to Kobe and give him my respect because he did do a (public service announcement) about it. At the time, it was not (done by) high-profile athletes."

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