

# Women for peace

Previously a small Khartoum grassroots organization focusing on internally displaced women, Ru'ya recently rose to international acclaim when its director, Zeinab Balandia, was awarded the Women PeaceMakers Prize by the University of San Diego. In *Sudan* spoke with Ms. Balandia and other members of the organization to learn more about the group's drive to empower women.

Seeking to encourage peace and build trust among communities by empowering women, 12 female university graduates from the Nuba Mountains, Southern Kordofan State, established Ru'ya in Khartoum in 2001.

"Women can move among the communities ... maybe you'll find a woman from south Sudan married to someone in the Nuba Mountains, in the conflict area," said Zeinab Balandia, founder and director of Ru'ya, the Arabic word for "vision".

Upon returning to Sudan after a two-month trip to San Diego, where she was awarded the peace prize, Ms. Balandia spoke about one of Ru'ya's first programmes, called "Women Ambassadors for Peace".

The organization founded three women's solidarity groups, which met once a week for nine consecutive months to discuss gender and human rights themes. The women supported each other by contributing sugar, soap and coffee to one member selected on a rotational basis.

A "Tray of Peace" was run with a similar goal for a year in 2001 in partnership with the Sudan Open Learning Organization in two internally displaced persons' (IDP) camps west of Khartoum. Once a month various tribes were invited to cook a traditional dish, share it and discuss its meaning.

"Participants were eating the food and had a chance to reflect on how it tastes, how it smells, whether they like it or not," Ms. Balandia said. "We collected all these reflections and said ... we are in peace now eating one food and everyone is enjoying (it). So this is what we needed, peace to enjoy it."

## Histories of displacement

Ru'ya has also strived to supply information about the displaced. "There was a question in our organization, why (do) Nuba people move from Nuba and end up in Port Sudan," the founder recalled. "There are seven states (in between), why didn't they stop in one of them?"

Seeking an answer, two women from the organization traveled to Port Sudan, where they discovered that some IDPs had not intended traveling so far north, but had been forcefully transported there in government trucks.

The findings led to a larger project conducted with the Sudanese Organization for Research and Development and the UN Development Programme in 2002, which surveyed 13 northern states to gather mainly demographical information about IDPs.

The project sought data on the history, reason and condition of displacement, finding various cases of human rights violations, including labour abuse and lack of legal protection.

Soon after the 2002 Nuba Mountains ceasefire agreement, a major change occurred in the organization's life. In 2003, Ru'ya hired a bus to transport women from northern states to meet women affiliated with the Sudan People's Liberation Army at a conference in Kauda, Southern Kordofan.

"About 35 women were traveling ... but national security stopped us just outside of Khartoum, before Jebel Awlia," the director said. As a result, three members had to attend court hearings until the case was dropped, but all the office furniture and properties were confiscated.

Six months later, Ru'ya opened a sub-office in Kadugli and in 2007 moved headquarters there, closing shop in Khartoum.

Sitting in the organization's newly acquired but humble training room in Kadugli, Food Security Coordinator Waleed Daoud said the group had held various trainings across the state. They included sessions focusing on improving the *jubraka* (kitchen garden), HIV/AIDS and female genital mutilation. Until 2009, Ru'ya also ran a centre for war-traumatized children.

## From cook to engineer

Although funds have since become scarce, some income-generating activities have continued, including seed distribution and marketing training, according to Zeinab's sister Hawa Balandia, capacity building coordinator.

In 2009, they also ran a food production and processing workshop for several hundred women around Kauda on the art



Zeinab Balandia showing her award at UNMIS headquarters.

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of making pumpkin jam and juice from wild fruits.

An exceptional Ru'ya project, which the director called "real empowerment of women", recently trained four illiterate, elderly ladies in solar panel management.

The women studied at India's Barefoot College for six months, returning as trainers and engineers to Miri and Derod villages, which they would electrify as soon as funds were acquired for solar panels.

As the founders of the organization had all been working on a volunteer basis, many sought employment in 2006 mainly with non-profit organizations, UN agencies and UNMIS.

"Zeinab is the only one of the founding members who has stayed on with Ru'ya," said Hwaida Omer, a founder now working with UNMIS Human Rights in Kadugli, adding that some original members were following the organization's activities on an advisory board.

The recent trip to the United States further inspired Ms. Balandia to work towards networking the solidarity groups, which have increased to 170 groups in number. She also hoped to establish a women's solidarity bank for micro-credit projects.

"I really want to see Ru'ya stand strongly," said the peace prize winner. ■

Text and photo: Eszter Farkas