

Opinion: Solar cookers making a difference in Darfur

By Mandy Kendall

In these economic times it is often hard to imagine what difference we can make, especially when there seems so little to go around to those nearest and dearest to us. However, sometimes it takes the plight of others to realize just how lucky we are.

Consider the horrors of the genocide in Darfur, a region of the Sudan, and the adversity of the refugees who have had to flee their homes. Since 2003, black Africans have been driven out of their villages and it is estimated that at least 400,000 people are dead and 2.7 million people have been displaced. About 250,000 refugees live across the border from Sudan in Chad, with 80 percent of them being women and children.

Like you, the Soroptimist International of Tahoe Sierra are all about peace and, together with the Jewish World Watch, we are raising funds to protect refugee women and children from rape, beatings, and other forms of violence. Women and girls who have fled the genocide in Darfur, Sudan are particularly vulnerable while performing the critical task of collecting firewood for cooking. Our mission is to reduce the frequency of these heinous crimes by providing women in refugee camps with an alternative cooking option: the solar cooker.

Usually, to cook a meal, the women and children leave the safety of the refugee camps to collect wood. As firewood is depleted, the walk to obtain it greatly increases, also increasing the risk of attack, rape and even death. Providing women with a Solar Cooker Kit can enable them to prepare meals without risking their safety.

Each kit includes two solar cookers, two pots, two pot holders, a year's supply of plastic cooking bags and skills training for refugee women and children.

The Solar Cookers also provide more than safety. Two solar cookers can save one ton of firewood each year, which also reduces greenhouse gases and as there is no need to tend a fire, women are free to do other tasks in safety and caring for their children. The solar cookers create an environmentally sustainable solution using renewal energy of the sun. There are also health benefits related to reducing smoke produced by a fire including respiratory issues.

The Solar Cooker Project also has an income-generating aspect as well for the women. Raw materials are sent to the camps and refugee women are hired to assemble them on site. Others train the women and children over 15 years of age in the cooker's proper use. After a camp is trained, a maintenance program is instituted to repair and replace cookers as needed.

One woman's story

Imani now lives in the Iridimi refugee camp in Chad. After her harrowing escape from her village in Darfur, where she witnessed the murder of her husband and two sisters, she hid for days from the savage Janjaweed militia and survived with only water in the unforgiving sun. Imani walked over 300 miles until crossing the border into Chad, finally arriving at the Iridimi refugee camp. Without sufficient fuel to cook her meals, she had to leave the relative safety of the camp to collect firewood. At the refugee camp, she learned to use a simple sun-cooker to prepare her meals and no longer has to risk her safety. Imani told us that because she no longer has to leave the camp she now feels protected and secure.

We can't stop the political problems of their country, but we can make it safer for them through their struggles. Soroptimist International of Tahoe Sierra is doing all it can

to buy as many solar cookers as possible to send to the women of Darfur.

One solar cooker kit costs \$30.

The Junior S Club girls at South Tahoe Middle School is helping with a collection at the school, planning to spend their lunchtimes over the next two weeks encouraging fellow students to donate any of their spare change. They are calling it Small Change for a Big Change.

Consider purchasing a solar cooker kit as a gift on behalf of a loved one's birthday, or a combined gift from the whole family for Mother's Day, Father's Day, Easter, or whatever days you celebrate for a special occasion. You will receive a gift card outlining the Solar Cooker project that you can give to that 'special someone' to show them the gift that you made on their behalf.

Mandy Kendall is a member of Soroptimist International Tahoe Sierra. Contact her about donations before April 1 at SolarCookerDonation@gmail.com.