

# Under the Spotlight

**George Clooney leads a celebrity delegation to Cairo to raise awareness of Darfur's humanitarian crisis**

By Nicolè A. Staab

**S**TAR POWER: IT'S what draws us to the movies for our favorite actors, to the stadium for that amazing athlete, to the stage for that sweet-sounding singing sensation. Celebrities are seen, heard, adored and imitated — a fact not lost on

advertisers. Star power can make us change our favorite brand of soda or sneakers, the theory goes, but can it make us change our worldview?

George Clooney hopes so. The Oscar-winning actor, producer, director and yes, heartthrob, was in Cairo last month with a celebrity delegation of the Save Darfur Coali-

tion to raise awareness of Sudan's ongoing violence, which has claimed the lives of an estimated 400,000 and displaced millions over the past three years.

While we readily accept the fact that stars sip Pepsi in commercials or sport a pair of Nikes on billboards in exchange for hefty sums of money, it seems ironic that consumers object to celebrities taking a unpaid stand on social issues — some have gone so far as declare that stars should stick to their day jobs.

But when celebrities do take action, drawing attention to worthy causes, is it fair for critics to belittle their efforts? With so many tragedies and crisis begging for eyes and ears and hearts, it often takes someone with star power to get people to look, listen and, hopefully, care.

Although recognized for his work on *Syriana*, Clooney deserves an Academy Award for his leading role in the Save Darfur Coalition. The job of a successful celebrity activist is complicated one, requiring not only compassion and drive, but also credibility that comes from intelligence, sincerity — and from not taking sides.

"We don't come here with any political agenda, we are not trying to solve all the political problems," Clooney told a gathering of students at the American University in Cairo. "There is a humanitarian crisis going on."

Led by Clooney, the Save Darfur delegation also included actor Don Cheadle (*Hotel Rwanda*, *Crash*); US speed skater William Joseph Cheek, a gold medalist in the 2006 Winter Olympics; and UN ambassador of sport Tegla Loroupe, Kenya's world champion long-distance runner.

On the final leg of a trip that also took them to China and Turkey, the group met with students at AUC, local activists, First Lady Suzanne Mubarak and key political leaders including Gamal Mubarak and representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Cheadle described the trip as an opportunity



Clooney is less concerned with finding a political solution to the Darfur crisis; his first mission is to help secure protection for Darfur's victims (Ben Curtis/Associated Press)



Urging action in Darfur, George Clooney, Don Cheadle, Tegla Loroupe and Joey Cheek met with students and leaders including First Lady Suzanne Mubarak (David Rubenstein/Associated Press)

“to learn and explore” from people closer to the events.

At AUC, the stars discussed Darfur with students from the university’s Forced Migration and Refugee Studies program, emphasizing the importance of getting people talking and the immediate need for action.

“We are looking for ideas, looking for help, looking for suggestions and offering whatever focus we can bring on it to try to come up with some solutions for security and for aid for those people,” Clooney explained. “We are here simply to ask questions and hopefully find places that we can all agree on — and see if anybody here has any good ideas, because that’s what we really need right now.”

Egyptian actor Amr Waked, who worked alongside Clooney in *Syriana*, also attended the AUC discussion. Like his international counterparts, Waked emphasized the need to look past politics to the human suffering.

“I really don’t know what’s wrong exactly in the Darfur issue,” Waked said. “All I know is that a lot of people die there everyday. And there’s a human-life catastrophe at the moment. I think that’s all you need to know to be encouraged to try to think about it, try to mention it, try to snowball some sort of a solution.”

“The people of Darfur need this conflict resolved — and immediately. But its not happening.”

As an advocate for social development himself, Waked recognizes the need for celebrity activism. “I think that celebrities are the num-

ber-one winner on [raising awareness] because whatever they say, people listen to, somehow.”

With Egypt a key mediating force in the Darfur conflict, Waked sees the Save Darfur delegation’s visit to Cairo and attention it earned as “a success.” After the AUC meeting, the corridors outside Oriental Hall were buzzing with students voicing opinions and discussing the latest events as they elbowed their way to the front of the crowd for a closer look at Clooney.

“All those in attendance left the room thinking, ‘Okay, maybe I should know more about this subject, maybe I should see what I can do,’ and I think that’s the whole point,” Waked says. “You don’t necessarily have to know everything about the subject, it’s just an act of opening the door.”

If you know nothing else, these celebrities say, know this much about the war in Darfur: In Sudan’s western region, upwards of 400,000 innocent people have been murdered, many more raped and tortured, and some 2 million have been forced from their homes into unprotected and poorly supplied displacement camps. These numbers, the activists say, are rising daily.

This is not Clooney’s first trip to the region. Last April, the actor-director and his father, journalist Nick Clooney, traveled to Sudan and Chad to focus the global spotlight on the horrors of Darfur. Clooney continued his efforts back at home as he spoke alongside politicians in Washington DC, addressed United Nations officials and participated in

## Celebrity Pitchmen

**R**ISING TALENT Amr Waked, who joined *Syriana* co-star George Clooney for the Save Darfur Coalition’s stop in Cairo last month, isn’t the only Egyptian star lending his voice to international causes.

In 2000, silver screen giant Adel Imam was appointed a goodwill ambassador for the UN High Council on Refugees. Over the years, the veteran funnyman has made public appearances to raise awareness on refugee issues and attracted unprecedented media attention to the cause throughout the region.

Other notable Egyptian celebrities who have lent their star power to United Nations causes include actor Mahmoud Qabil (UNICEF goodwill ambassador) and actress Safia El-Emary (who promotes women’s rights as a goodwill ambassador for the UN Population Fund).

Then, of course, there’s Hussein Fahmy, popular Ramadan talk-show host and former UN goodwill ambassador. Fahmy lashed out last summer at the UN during the war in Lebanon. The outspoken actor claimed the UN had done nothing to avert or stop the conflict and condemned his fellow celebrity pitchmen for failing to take a stand, saying he had resigned his UN post as a result.

His remarks won a sharp rebuke from Qabil, who claimed Fahmy had actually wrapped up his involvement with the UN in 2005. Not to be outdone, Fahmy snapped back that Qabil had committed the sin of visiting Israel on his American passport.

Save Darfur Coalition rallies.

“I think it’s a good move by all the stars that were there — Clooney and Cheadle and two sports figures,” Waked says, “and it’s a good move that they came to talk to the people in the region. ... It’s a shame that this comes from the West when it’s right next door to us. ... I know [celebrity activism] is not very available here, but there are a few stars that try.” **et**