



OLYMPIAN HOPES TO DRAW ATTENTION TO DARFUR CRISIS

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U.S. speedskater Joey Cheek says he is using his fame from winning the Olympic gold to draw attention to an issue not getting enough media coverage in the United States -- the humanitarian crisis in Darfur.

When Olympic speedskater Joey Cheek donated his \$40,000 bonus for winning gold and silver medals in Turin, Italy, to Sudanese refugees in Chad, he said it was a way to focus attention on a growing humanitarian crisis in Africa.

"The money I donated was not a huge dollar figure for the amount of help that's needed over there, but it was a gesture that then sparked other people to give," he said.

The money went to Right to Play, an organization that helps children in underprivileged communities through sports. The organization says it has raised more than \$400,000 since Cheek's announcement.

Crisis in Darfur

In Darfur, the western region of the African nation of Sudan, militias are attacking civilians in what U.S. and other international leaders and aid groups are calling genocide.

At least 200,000 people have died and 2 million have fled to the neighboring country of Chad to live in refugee camps.

Cheek, 26, said he became interested in the Darfur plight while traveling for his sport in other countries, where he discovered much more media coverage of Darfur, AIDS and other problems in Africa than in the American media.

"I thought if I had a moment in the sun, or in the spotlight, I would take it to try and raise awareness [about the situation in Darfur], and this cause in particular I think is such a massive, massive tragedy that it was the one that drew me in," he said.

Raising awareness

Cheek is visiting college campuses around the nation to talk about what is happening in Darfur and promote a letter-writing campaign called Million Voices for Darfur to encourage U.S. intervention in the crisis. He plans to be one of the speakers at the Save Darfur Coalition rally in Washington, D.C. on April 30.

Cheek said his efforts are part of his "goal-oriented" personality.

"I felt that if I wanted to tackle something I should set a task, and then you stick with it until you accomplish it. And that's true in athletic or business goals, academic goals, in anything that you pursue," he said at a stop in Washington, D.C. on his 21,000 mile tour to promote his Darfur projects.

His involvement, he said, stems from an appreciation of the advantages he has received in life.

"I think it's our obligation, being as lucky and blessed as we are in this country to have the wealth and the opportunities we have, to share that with the rest of the world," he said.

"If you were born in another country you would want someone to do the same for you."

The world is a much smaller place whose inhabitants are intimately related no matter where they live, he continued.

"The fate of someone in Africa has a direct response to the fate of someone in the U.S. on some level. We may not see it now."

“Apathy is no excuse”

Cheek said he wasn't always tuned into global issues.

"In my past when I'm on the road, I don't take time to vote, I don't take the time to look up candidates and that's been to my detriment. That's been something that I aim to fix."

Now he said he believes, "Apathy is no excuse for having any type of crisis."

-- *By Larisa Epatko, Online NewsHour*

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