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Francis Bok's Story: Former Slave In Sudan Turns American Celebrity

By Jeffrey Zaslow Staff Reporter of *The Wall Street Journal*

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Francis Bok hasn't seen many movies, but he has a favorite -- "The Ten Commandments." As an escaped slave from Sudan, he says he identifies with the film's characters, who are delivered from the ravages of slavery to the joys and responsibilities of freedom.

For Mr. Bok, who now lives near Boston, watching the film is both exhilarating and painful. "Moses said, 'Let my people go!' and God opened the sea," he says. "But for my people, the sea has not yet opened."

And so the 23-year-old is on a mission: He rallies crowds at churches, meets with members of Congress and hits radio and TV talk shows to remind America that slavery still exists. In the process, he has become a very American creation -- the celebrity ex-slave.

National Basketball Association players invite him to their parties, 40,000 fans cheered him at a Jane's Addiction concert last year, and he has signed a six-figure book deal with St. Martin's Press. He even gets asked for his autograph: Beneath his signature, he often writes "The Warrior."

"I'm a warrior against slavery," he explains.

Humanitarian groups charge that the Arab Muslim-dominated government in northern Sudan supports a slave trade targeting black villagers in the south. Sudanese officials deny slavery exists and say the practice is illegal. "Abductions" are a byproduct of tribal warfare and an 18-year civil war, says Tarig Bakhit, a counselor to Sudan's mission to the United Nations. He calls Mr. Bok's allegation -- that he was enslaved from ages seven to 17 -- "propaganda" for rebel forces.

Mr. Bok's story rings true with U.N. officials as well as several Sudanese, though it couldn't be independently confirmed. It's "consistent" with other reports from the region, says Peter Crowley of Unicef's office for emergency programs. Piyo Tem Kuag, a distant relative of Mr. Bok's who served as a chief in the area where Mr. Bok lived as a boy, says he recalls that young Francis was reported missing by an uncle in 1986. Mr. Kuag, who now works in food service at a Fairfax, Va., hospital, says he helped Mr. Bok make it to the U.S.

Coming from a country where human beings are allegedly sold for about \$35, Mr. Bok now commands \$500 a speech. He gives about 100 speeches a year -- some free of charge -- and uses a portion of his earnings to help support other refugees. He also receives a salary of less than \$20,000 a year from the nonprofit, Boston-based American Anti-Slavery Group, which aims to free the 27 million people world-wide that it believes are enslaved.

On a recent Tuesday, Mr. Bok drove his bright red 2001 Honda Accord to Dover-Sherborn Middle School, in an affluent community outside Boston, to tell his story to 485 children. A very thin 6-foot-6, he wore a pressed olive-colored suit and a bright gold tie and clutched the microphone with both hands as he told his tale of being abducted at age seven from his farming village in Southern Sudan.

On May 15, 1986, he said, he went to the market to sell eggs, when hundreds of Arabs from the government-armed militia swept through on horseback, shooting the men or cutting off their heads with swords. Mr. Bok said most of his family was killed or abducted, and that women and children were grabbed and taken north to be slaves.

Mr. Bok said his master was a nomadic livestock owner named Giema Abdullah, who forced the boy to tend the cows and told him that since he was an animal, he'd have to sleep with the animals.

One Meal a Day

Mr. Bok said his master's children beat him for fun, and he was given just one meal a day. He first tried to escape when he was 14 but was recaptured and tied to a stake for 10 days of beatings. Other slave children had their legs chopped off after trying to run away, he said. Mr. Abdullah's whereabouts are unknown to humanitarian workers and U.N. officials.

At 17, Mr. Bok said, he managed to escape, traveling up the Nile to Cairo, where he found a U.N. refugee office. In 1999, he was resettled in Fargo, N.D., along with hundreds of other Sudanese refugees, by Lutheran Social Services. A year later, Mr. Bok was working in a meatpacking plant in Ames, Iowa, when he was approached by American Anti-Slavery, which had heard his story through a Sudanese acquaintance of the ex-slave.

Looking for a way to put a face to its cause, the PR-savvy group recognized that Mr. Bok -- handsome and increasingly articulate -- could be its best marketing tool. It offered to resettle him in Boston as a spokesman for the neo-abolitionist movement. Mr. Bok says he was initially reluctant: "I wondered, if I talked against the [Sudanese] government, what would happen to me?"

Kevin Bales, director of the Washington-based abolitionist group Free The Slaves, says he knows more than 20 ex-slaves who live in the U.S. Most want no attention. "It's very traumatic," he says.

American Anti-Slavery, which gets most of its annual budget of about \$375,000 from small donations and a few corporate backers, flew Mr. Bok to its Boston headquarters. Officials showed him photos taken in Sudan of slaves who had their fingers, limbs or noses cut off as punishment for such infractions as losing a master's cow. "I saw those pictures of the women and children -- things I had witnessed with my own eyes," he says. "I decided it would be an honor to join them and be part of what they were doing."

Mr. Bok said he has received threats from Sudanese Muslims since joining Anti-Slavery, but he is determined to continue speaking out.

After growing up in a world without books, Mr. Bok has become fluent in the world of American media. He fields press calls on his cellphone and pens protest letters. He has a literary agent and recently signed with a speakers bureau. On Anti-Slavery's Web site, iAbolish.com (www.iabolish.com), he tells his story through a kind of Internet slide show.

Anti-Slavery officials coached Mr. Bok on the importance of eye contact, dramatic pauses, and body language. "He didn't walk out of Sudan as a public speaker, but he quickly learned how to engage people in a beautiful way," says Jesse Sage, Anti-Slavery's associate director.

Two sisters from the Roches, a folk band, who met Mr. Bok through a nun they know, turned his words into what they call "a song of prayer" on their new CD. Perry Farrell, lead singer of Jane's Addiction, met Mr. Bok through a friend who is an Anti-Slavery volunteer. He invited Mr. Bok to speak on stage last April at a concert in Palm Springs, Calif.

Appeal to Britney

In December, Mr. Bok publicly reprimanded Britney Spears for her 2001 song "I'm a Slave 4 U." In an open letter to the teen idol that received coverage in a few newspapers, he said he assumed she meant no harm but probably didn't realize "that millions of people, many of them our age, are enslaved around the world." Ms. Spears never replied, and spokeswomen for her, and for her label, Jive Records, decline to comment on Mr. Bok. Some fans, however, lashed out at the ex-slave.

On a Web site devoted to Ms. Spears, a typical message from a fan said: "Hey Francis Bok. GET OVER IT! The song isn't about you or your problems."

Last year, Mr. Bok did a radio interview with Howard Stern, enduring juvenile questions about

his relationships with the animals he tended and with his master's wife. On the air, Mr. Bok promoted the group's Web site, which received hundreds of extra visitors that day.

Mr. Bok shares a simple two-bedroom apartment with a Sudanese roommate in a racially mixed, lower-middle-class Boston suburb. He spends some of his extra money for private tutoring in English and math and to save for college. He recently installed a high-speed Internet connection in his apartment. He also bought himself an iMac computer for e-mailing and research. When not on the road speaking, Mr. Bok takes high-school classes, plays basketball and works in the Anti-Slavery office.

At the middle school near Boston, Mr. Bok answered questions for three hours after his speech. "Your voices can bring an end to slavery," he told the children. They promised to become outspoken abolitionists and stood in line to shake his hand. Many called him their hero and said his story would make a great movie. "He'd need to be played by someone with a lot of oomph," said Kandia Frangiadakis, 12.

A half-dozen movie studios and producers have called to discuss rights to Mr. Bok's book, which he is writing with a co-author, says Mr. Bok's agent, James Levine in New York. He says offers won't be entertained until the manuscript is completed. St. Martin's plans to title the book "Escape From Slavery," but Mr. Bok has his own title in mind: "I Am Not an Animal."

Write to Jeffrey Zaslow at jeff.zaslow@wsj.com

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