John Prendergast has talked back to tyrants, networked with Hollywood activists, and given hope to hundreds of thousands of refugees. Can one man save a country from itself? By Jonathan Foreman
Photographed by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin.

ENDGAME IN AFRICA
Dajuma, the capital of Chad, is a typical place to encounter John Prendergast, the American peace-broker, human-rights activist, and former Clinton administration diplomat who, as essentially a one-man operation, has made it his mission to stop the genocide in Darfur. Half a century after France granted Chad its independence, the central African country is a post-colonial bakese, haunted by coups d’etat, corruption, and poverty. N'Djamena is a city right out of a Graham Greene novel, bubbling with plotters, foreign rebels, aid workers, missionaries, mercenaries, oil prospectors, and U.S. advisers. Throughout Chad, local politicians are loyal primarily to the highest bidder, then to their tribe, then to their faith, and finally, with reservations, to a regime that controls little more than the capital. The city streets are full of soldiers, but only the purple-accent-wearing Presidential Guard is entrusted with guns. The desert lands near the eastern border with Sudan are home to 250,000 refugees from the bloody conflict in the neighboring region of Darfur.

Everyone who is anyone in N'Djamena hangs out at the slightly seedy sixties-era Novotel hotel. Prendergast stands out among the safari-shirted expats in the lobby and the brush-cut Foreign Legionnaires eying French businessmen's wives by the pool. He's in the perfect spot to hear who's up, who's down, and just when the rebels in exile are expected to invade in another coup attempt, the last just six months ago. Tall and slim at 45, with graying shoulder-length hair and a thin goatee, wearing jeans and wrap-around shades, Prendergast looks more rock rebel than former State Department official. Before and since his time in government, he has fashioned himself as a freelance peace-broker—the synthesis of a mercenary—and now works for the International Crisis Group (ICG), a respected left-leaning nonprofit that scouts out geopolitical conflicts (Balkans border disputes, tensions in Indonesia, power struggles in Afghanistan) and then issues reports that offer critical intelligence, analysis, and solutions.

Within this Brussels-based organization, Prendergast is better known even than ICG's head, former Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans. It's Prendergast who takes movie stars and news anchors to various African war zones and who regularly appears on CNN and the BBC. "Every time you take your eye off the ball with Darfur, there is another op-ed by John recalling your attention to it," says journalist Christopher Hitchens, who has visited Africa with Prendergast. As a leader of the Save Darfur Coalition, an umbrella group of disparate human rights and relief organizations that are speaking out for peace with one loud voice, he has become a cult figure on college campuses. Every day Prendergast gets more than 500 e-mails, many of them from young people—often female—saying how much he has inspired them. Counting all his congressional testimonies and campus rallies, he gave more than 150 speeches last year, often railing against the Bush administration's mistakes in Darfur. "We don't need to send in the 82nd Airborne," he says, advocating instead United Nations peacekeeping troops and more consistent pressure from the U.S. "It worked in Sudan with Osama bin Laden. They kicked him out, broke up the Al Qaeda commercial network and the training camps."

His outspokenness has given him a stature well above that of a squawking critic: "John goes into bad places, puts his ass on the line, and tries to figure out what governments and others should do," says his friend Samantha Power, whose reporting on Darfur in The New Yorker won a National Magazine Award. Former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke puts it more bluntly: "John is one of those rare people who go out in the field, cut through the bullshit, cut through the bureaucracy, come back, and tell the truth. Attention must be paid," Nicholas Kristof, who op-ed columns in The New York Times about his own dangerous trek in Darfur recently won a Pulitzer, calls Prendergast "the coolest policy wonk around. And probably the one most likely to come down with malaria or liver flukes."

Prendergast's combination of athletic prowess, fiery intellect, and moral glamour has also made him astonishingly well known—and well connected—among the entertainment community. Prendergast has addressed the foundations of top Hollywood agencies like William Morris—organizations that match agency clients with charitable causes. Indeed, Prendergast has his own agent in L.A., as is writing on everyday activism with Hotel Rwanda star Don Cheadle, and is already acting in a part written for him in a Ugandan-crisis movie starring Robin Wright Penn and Javier Bardem. There is even talk of a film about his own adventures, if they could be made simple enough for a screenplay.

One episode in a Prendergast biopic might center on the day in 2003 when Angelina Jolie gave a talk at the Capitol about the global plight of refugees. "He's every- man's fantasy," he recalls. "Like a thousand other schmuckes, I was just standing there listening to her speeches. At the end there were hundreds of guys all trying to talk to her. Angelina was coming out of this back room. Before I could say anything she said, 'I saw you in the audience and hoped that we could meet.' We started talking about Tanzania, and whatever I said resonated. And she said, 'We have to go to Africa together. I want to go to Darfur with you.'"

A month later, she did just that. While her son Maddox, her bodyguard, and a snippy all-stayed back in Uganda, John, Prendergast, and a photographer went into Congo, staying at small hotels on the shore of Lake Kiva. On their return, Jolie and Prendergast put together a project for the demobilization of child soldiers, which she funded. He also arranged for footage of their trip to appear on the Web site of the Holocaust museum in Washington. Their online Congo travelogue received so many hits that the museum's server crashed. "These are situations that the mainstream media and most of the world ignore," Jolie says in an e-mail, adding that she has "seen how John's work helps shine a light on some of the world's worst injustices." Prendergast sees such an experi-
once as a boon for the cause. "If I can find a new show or a new celebrity, I can make thousands of converts."

On this trip to Chad, Prendergast is traveling with a good friend and Durbarroman Sudanese activist, who asked to be referred to as Ahmad for fear his life would otherwise be endangered. He is a fellow at a prestigious university and has an American accent after two decades in exile. Ahmad works as Prendergast's translator and "fixer," organizing meetings with Chad's key players—diplomats, officials from foreign-relief agencies, and representatives of rebel groups from Darfur, home to the new century's first genocide.

In early 2003, the Sudanese regime, led by President Omar al-Bashir, unleashed Arab militia groups on camel and horseback called Janjaweed (the word means "ghostly riders") to crush an uprising by black rebels in the region. The商men burned villages, looted livestock, poisoned wells, raped mothers and daughters, and slaughtered whole communities in a campaign of ethnic cleansing. The conflict in nearby regions are often religion-based, but in Darfur all sides are Muslim. At least 400,000 people have been killed in the massacres, and six times more may have been driven from their homes. Last May, a peace deal between the Sudanese government and the Sudan Liberation Movement, the strongest rebel faction, was signed, but from the start, the pact seemed doomed. Other rebel groups were excluded from the negotiating table, and the SLA split into rival groups. Seven thousand African Union peacekeepers were charged with enforcing the agreement, but they have been undaunted and poorly equipped.

"I don't know of one incident where the African Union has protected a village or a woman," Prendergast says. With the AU's latest extended mandate now set to expire at the end of the year, there is widespread fear among international observers that without intervention from the U.N., the killing could be worse than ever.

"To get to the refugee camps, Prendergast often needs the cooperation of aid agencies, which run humanitarian flights to remove desert airstrips in the eastern part of Chad, hundreds of miles away. Wherever he travels in Africa, it seems all doors are open—except in places where his denunciation of local despots has made him unwelcome: Sudan, where he is now banned, or Zimbabwe, where he was arrested, beaten up, and thrown out of the country for slipping in without a visa. In Chad, he is embarking on the kind of fact-finding and networking trip that he takes every few months, traveling the Darfurian refugees for their opinions of the peace deal, and he wants to make his fifth illegal trip across the border. Safe passage into Sudan will require an escort from one of the Darfur rebel groups. The trick for Ahmad—who can get any rebel leader on the phone—is to find the right group, one that can deliver on its promise of transport and that isn't exaggerating about its control of territory across the border.

Meanwhile, Prendergast's arrival in N'Djamena has been enough to get Alios, Dib, the president of Chad, to change his schedule for an impromptu meeting one evening. After picking up Prendergast at his hotel, an official Mercedes takes him along the capital's colonnaded but unpaved streets to the presidential compound: two large, heavily guarded houses with six Hummers parked outside. Dib is a tall, assured man, younger looking than in the picture that adorn every office in the country. Sitting in a garish suit, flanked by powerful air conditioners, Prendergast apologizes for dressing so casually.

"I come from the field," he explains. Everyone else in the room is in a dark suit. "I like the field myself," replies the president, a former general who took power in 1989 after launching an invasion from across the border in Darfur.

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a prominent European diplomat. The friendly appointment amounts to the emissary brazenly Prendergast for an hour, blunting the U.S. for worry of Chide’s worse and warning that China is supplying Sudan with arms to get to the oil reserves under Darfur soil. “God, I hate being lectured,” Prendergast mumbles. But at the next appointment, the activist does all the talking, while the U.S. ambassador Marc Wall sits through Prendergast’s commentary on Bush administration mistakes. “Incidents don’t work with genocide,” he complains. A change in the White House might one day make his guest the chief U.S. official in the region, and Wall discreetly withholds his own opinions, taking in all the noise that Prendergast’s networking and traveling can yield. This line of work is mostly showing up, and it’s remarkable how few do. “To make a difference with issues like Darfur, you don’t need much,” Prendergast says. “There’s no lobby for genocide. It’s indifference, ignorance, and inertia that we have to overcome.”

Prendergast’s do-gooding began early. As a teenager, he volunteered in soup kitchens when he wasn’t playing on every school sports team and earning money as a landscape gardener. His inspiration came largely from his Catholic parents, a traveling salesman and his social-worker wife. In Prendergast’s words, they “believed in the Mother Theresa branch of the Church, through, paradoxically, they had very right-wing politics, especially my mother. And we fought bitterly and disagreed on every issue.”

It wasn’t until his undergraduate years that Prendergast became interested in Africa. “I would be watching TV late at night, and at one or two in the morning the news would come on from Save the Children and World Vision,” he says. “This was 1983 and there were all these pictures of the Ethiopian famine.”

Horrified by what he saw, one summer he bought the first ticket to Africa he could afford, for a flight bound for Mali. On the plane he had the first of many serendipitous moments to come. He met a Malian agriculture official who recognized him from the Georgetown basketball court, where Prendergast often sparred with top players like Patrick Ewing. The man offered him a place to stay, moving one of his wives into another hut to make room. He also showed the young American around Mali.

This first exposure to Africa left Prendergast “spellbound,” as he recalls. While attending five undergraduate colleges (“I’m a rolling stone,” he admits), he made his way to volunteer projects with children in Zambia, and then to Senegal, where he worked in an orphanage. There, he witnessed first-hand how the annual U.S. aid award of hundreds of millions of dollars was pouring into the regime of the brutal dictator Sade Barre. He concluded that “in many parts of Africa the U.S. was much more part of the problem than the solution,” and resolved to delve into the intricacies of foreign policy.

He enrolled in graduate school at University of Pennsylvania and American University, where he studied for master’s degrees in international relations. (“I never used any of that stuff,” he says.) Then he took on jobs at Human Rights Watch, the U.S. Institute of Peace, and UNICEF. He wrote the first of his seven books and became a well-known voice in the then relatively obscure field of U.S. Africa policy. In 1996 he hired by Susan Rice, President Clinton’s assis-
President Bush. "It's very knowledgeable, crisp, on point; he knew the questions to ask," Prendergast recalls. "I had a sinking feeling that this guy is going to be a much more powerful opponent for us Democrats than most people think." After the meeting, a White House aide told Prendergast that the only reason Bush had bemoaned his loss was because the President had mistaken him for Bono.

Several days after arriving in N'Djamena, Prendergast ventures out of the capital to some of the refugee camps in eastern Chad. After a bumpy ride through scrub and dust, at a bandit hot police post, an armed Chad intelligence officer with bloodshot eyes stops Prendergast and his team. The convoy has been driving along a bumpy road that U.N. staff are forbidden to use. The stand-off is tense, with accusations of espionage. Suddenly one of the officers stares hard at Prendergast and breaks into a smile. He recognizes him from TV. The atmosphere and body language instantly change, and cold drinks are brought out for the distinguished visitors, who are then sent on their way.

Because it is too hazardous to visit the nearest camp after dark, the U.N. staff even arranges for refugee leaders to be brought to the compound as dusk falls. The five oldest men waiting for Prendergast in the compound's dusty courtyard look surprisingly prosperous, as if they've put on their Sunday best to greet the American. Everywhere he goes in eastern Chad, Prendergast poses the same question: Which tribes and subgroups are in the camp? Which Sudanese rebel groups do they support? Are there rebels recruiting in the camp? Are the rebel groups stronger or weaker since the spring coup attempt in Chad?

The tales of slaughter and brutality that they offer over the next two hours scratch the ears. At one point they tell of women having their legs shot or broken before they are raped, so they cannot escape. The lives of men and children, however, are rarely spared. Prendergast has interviewed thousands of refugees, and his expression remains blank even as they recount how Arab horsemen tossed infants into the flames of burning huts.

In contrast to the many macro foreign correspondents and aid workers, Prendergast has been pulled to talk about his own scrapes, like the time when he was almost shot at a Rwandan checkpoint by "an obviously loopy-up and angry" teenage militant. Or the flight into southern Sudan when his little place was nearly shot down by surface-to-air missiles. Or the time in Somalia, in 1994, when he was meeting with a "minor warlord," and a mortar shell landed in the room next door, blowing the structure to pieces.

"When you hear stories of a foreigner being killed, it is usually random acts of violence," he says. "But they are almost understandable in context. The killer could have lost a close family member or experienced levels of trauma we can't begin to imagine. You have to respect the circumstances and the unknown, and never impose your own sense of what is proper or appropriate, because it's an alternative universe. If you expect that, because you're a humanitarian or neutral or a do-gooder, you're exempt from the insanity of the moment, or the brutality of the local context, you're wrong!"

Like most people whose professional lives involve physical danger, Prendergast is extremely cautious. As a rule, he never touches alcohol, tobacco or caffeine. He always wears a seat belt, even in the backseat. In Africa, he refuses all food except chicken and rice, often surviving on granola bars. His inside can't handle spicy food, and he pops Lactaid pills like candy. He can no longer tolerate low temperatures after a bout of malaria in the mid-eighties. "Under 70 feels cold to me now," he says. Along the way, his body has hosted the germs and parasites you might expect to encounter in this line of work. So his self-restrictions are not a hypochondriac's obsession. "Hey, when you're in risky situations, you minimize the risks," he explains.

And his resilience is always in evidence. The locals cover as much of their skin as possible, the expats wear high-tech safari gear, but Prendergast doesn't seem to mind the extreme heat or sandpaper wind. He wears nothing more than old cotton T-shirts with political slogans, jeans, and clunky Nike hiking shoes. In the remote border town of Bahai, where the mercury tops 111 degrees, Prendergast can sleep indoors, without any ventilation, though it's an exaggeration to say he sleeps. A chronic insomniac, he barely manages three hours a night. Though when joking across the desert, he can close his eyes and be gone, oblivious to heat, sunlight, and blaring music on the radio.

Apart from his perpetually red eyes and the headaches that he blames on lactose intolerance, Prendergast is in terrific shape. At home in D.C., he works out at the gym every day—on top of his three games of basketball a week. In Africa he does sets of 100 push-ups and sit-ups on the sand. As Samantha Power puts it, "He's the worst drunk in history. He wears tube socks! He looks best when his shirt's off."

Prendergast's cheerful openness about nearly every part of his life is in stark contrast to his refusal to discuss any part of his private life, including his marriage. At the mere broaching of this subject, his affable manner gives way to irritation. "My personal life is ten times more interesting than my professional life," he confesses. "That's why I don't talk about it."

Prendergast is admittedly, unapologetically fearless when it comes to the basics that are a diplomat's main skills. He speaks no languages other than English. He hates flying. He can't drive stick shift, doesn't wear a watch, and has problems with almost anything mechanical or technical. On this trip he struggles with sending text messages on the satellite phone. "I've got no skills," he confesses. "All I have is this—" he points to his mouth. "And this," he adds, "I am a jumpy jock!"

Near the desert town of Bahai, on the far eastern edge of Chad, Prendergast and Ahlman meet with one of the rebel groups whose leaders they spoke to in N'Djamena, to arrange a border crossing. The location for the meeting has been arranged by satellite phone, but the convoy can't find the clump of trees where the rebels are hiding. As dusk falls, the Land Cruisers finally come to a relatively lush area where the dunes give way to white flats. A man starts driving from a low ridge. The rebel is standing on a shallow dune, behind which is a shimmering lake where camels are drinking in the fading light. Without knowing it, the convoy has crossed into Darfur.

The rebels sport U.S. and French military camouflage uniforms over keffiyehs and sandals. Their commander speaks a South-sounding English to Ahlman, with whom he attended the University of Khartoum. After a long argument, part in Arabic, part in English, Ahlman and the commander reach a compromise about how (continued on page 222)