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Some kind of beat-up

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Heads turn when Betty Atong strolls across the flat, uninteresting asphalt of the Sunshine bus terminal. The 19-year-old is very tall, very thin, very pretty and very dark. She is vivacious, confident and clearly smart: after four years in the country, she is about to begin a university degree in banking and finance.

But lately there are times when Betty is out walking and she feels strangely ashamed to be seen. A wave of recent media reports highlighting crimes among Melbourne's African community and claims that young Africans are running in gangs, has left her unusually self-conscious. Now she can't help wondering what bad things people are thinking about her.

"Suddenly I feel unwelcome," she says. "Even walking around I feel kind of embarrassed to be Sudanese."

Betty doesn't deny that there are regular troubles among the young people who congregate after school in the otherwise unwelcoming half-hectare of the depot: last year she phoned police when she saw a boy beaten bloody there. And she doesn't dispute that sometimes her countrymen are involved.

"But in the papers and on radio now it's always like 'Sudanese'," she says. "Even among the Africans here there's Ethiopians, Liberians, Eritreans, Somalians. Then there's all the other ethnic groups. I feel upset because they're saying Sudanese when they should be saying just 'young people' having problems.

"I feel bad about it because it's kind of racist."

Sunshine's public transport hub is a grey wedge of bus stops and taxi ranks in the shadow of the curving overpass that straddles the western suburb's railway station. Its central location has made it a sort of unlikely town square and often a forum for violence involving a multicultural mix of young people. In June 1995, 17-year-old Tuyen Truong was stabbed to death on one of the platforms following a petty dispute over drugs. But for the past 14 months the focus and gossip has fallen on young African "gangs".

In November 2005 a couple of young blokes made the mistake of harassing three African-Australian girls as they sat in a west-bound train at North Melbourne station. A large part of that mistake was hassling girls who had mobile phones and texting skills.

When the two small groups got off the train at Sunshine, the mouthy guys, also Africans, found some of the girls' friends - on some estimates, up to 40 teenagers - waiting to chastise them. The one-sided fight spilled out into the bus depot and when it was over, three young men were hospitalised, one with life-threatening knife wounds.

For decades the subway at the railway station has been an uneasy traverse, particularly at night. But now the wider transport hub shares the dubious reputation.

A couple of weeks ago the local Brimbank Leader warned that the "ongoing gang wars" there were "a massacre waiting to happen" and said violence between different racial groups involved weapons

ranging from fence palings and steel poles to the handles of shopping trolleys.

A local businessmen quoted in the story now says it was "a bit of a f---in' beat-up", but the depot has become another apparent hot spot in the largely talkback and tabloid-driven controversy over alleged African youth gangs and lawlessness.

Local police will say that the hub is "a problem", and youth worker Les Twentyman says that since the 2005 stabbings there have been fights and "rumblings on a constant basis".

Sudanese youths have become "significant players" in some of the problems there, he says. "But it's not just them. It's Sudanese against Vietnamese; Sudanese against Tongans or Pacific Islanders; Islanders against Vietnamese; and even Sudanese against Sudanese.

"It's a mixed bag, always has been. It's got so that around the end of the school day, the coppers have up to four cars there."

Sunshine police Inspector Scott Mahony says the transport hub probably has a higher incidence of crime than other areas of the suburb. Apart from robberies, most incidents involve schoolkids.

"Disputes over girlfriends, schoolyard grudges, inter-campus rivalries," he says. "But Africans are the minority of offenders. The majority are caucasian.

"A lot of people in the media lately are talking about African gangs, which is just so wrong. You might have a group of people who socialise together from the same ethnic group, but that doesn't make them a gang. A fight might break out between groups of youths, but just because the groups are from an ethno-specific background, doesn't make it a gang thing.

"One thing I've noticed is that there's a fear that most people have when they see groups of African males congregating together . . . The majority of this issue is just lack of understanding: the African people are very social people, they gather in public places and more often than not they're doing nothing wrong. But because they're tall and they stand out, people notice them and seem to immediately fear the worst," he says.

MAHONY's stance is at odds with that of his Police Association secretary Paul Mullett, who suggested that Sudanese in particular were "roaming in gangs" and called for the establishment of a task force to deal with them. "They come from a lawless society and they find it difficult, not only with the better standards of living here, but also the higher standards of behaviour," he said.

That, along with Dandenong Mayor Peter Brown's complaint that the Australian Government was "easing the ethnic problems of black Africa by transporting their citizenry to Australia by the jumbo jet-load", the accidental death in Footscray of a man hit by a car driven by an African woman, a knifing in Keysborough and the conviction of Sudanese man Hakeem Hakeem for a number of rapes beginning a month after he arrived in the country, have elements of the media in something of a lather. And that has left many in the local African community saddened, fearful and increasingly resentful.

"We are very worried," says Aguer B.K. Raul, chairman of the Footscray-based African Community Development Council. Sudanese culture, he says, is based on honesty, respect for elders and dignity, but the whole community now seems under suspicion because of the actions of a handful among the 18,000 Sudanese living in Victoria.

"We are really angry and really serious because this type of allegation has really damaged our

dignity," he says. "Suddenly we are not living in harmony, we are living under threat and in a fearful situation. We are being victimised. There's no stability. Sometimes we feel we are still in a war."

William Bol, of the Australian Sudanese Youth Union, adds: "I don't see any reason why one person's mistake has to be generalised to the whole community. That is really a discrimination."

Both point out that whenever there's trouble, the word "Sudanese" seems to have been adopted as a sort of shorthand for "African". Melbourne's African population - centred in the western suburbs, Flemington, Heidelberg and Dandenong - is as diverse as the continent itself. At Sunshine you'll find Sudanese, Liberians, Ethiopians, Eritreans, Congolese and people from Sierra Leone. West Heidelberg's 3000-odd Somali residents has earned it the nickname "Somaliberg".

And when the Somalis - among the first wave of African refugees - arrived in the 1990s, they faced similar suspicion and claims their youths were ganging up, says Abdinur Weli, youth worker with the Northern Migrant Resource Centre. There were fights, he admits, but as in Sunshine they were mainly between school-aged boys across a range of ethnic groups.

A number of initiatives, often in conjunction with police, have brought peace. "I've been working in this area as a youth worker for the last four years and I haven't come across any gang or any gang mentality. Gangs in my opinion are groups who are really formalised, have a leader and have some sort of criminal intent," he says.

"Young people are bored, and when young people are bored they gather and will do things. They come together and they talk and then one will do some stupid thing to impress the others, others try to copy and stupid things happen: maybe breaking windows, maybe harassing girls. It's bad but it's not gangs.

"But in Australia we have that fear about the unknown. Our media and our politicians talk about the negative. So when you see 10 young Africans gathered somewhere, you're going to think they're up to something."

Stereotypes of African-American gangstas from TV are a two-edged problem, he says. On one hand they are a poor but attractive role model for angry kids, while the same images heighten fears in Australians. "They see 20 Somali kids, they think 'Oh my God, they're doing violence, they're Crips or Bloods'. But then if you're an African dressed beautiful, drive a nice car, you're a drug dealer."

In Footscray, Raul and Bol blame a surfeit of unaccustomed freedoms and overly acquiescent service providers and community workers for a breakdown in parental authority and for encouraging teenage boys to leave both school and home.

Centrelink gives income to teenage drop-outs, they claim, while child protection officers indulge youths who claim their parents are abusive. "The young people who normally go to Sunshine and gang there are usually people who are separated from their family - the people who the social workers have advised 'Live alone, don't live with a family, don't live with an uncle, don't listen to them'," says Bol. "They go there and when the violence happens the community is blamed."

Les Twentyman says that in December Open Family put a proposal to the Federal Government to recruit two Sudanese outreach workers but no decision has yet been made. He says in 2004-2005, half of the African refugee intake was under the age of 20, yet there has been little linkage to education transition programs, drug and alcohol services, employment or sport and recreation.

"And they dump them in these areas that always have problems. Not Brighton and Camberwell or

Balwyn. It's always Braybrook, St Albans, West Heidelberg or Dandenong: those places with a history of unemployment and disenfranchised kids. It's almost like a structured thing to keep the poorer classes in battle mode."

BUT even their sometime opponents in those "battles" reckon the Sudanese are getting bad press. "Alfred" runs with a small gang of Tongans who have taken the name DSC, or Dirty Saint Crips, and who hang around the Sunshine subway and don't mind a fight.

"We don't like them," he says. "It's just, like, the way they all act, the way they walk, trying to act like African-Americans. They think they're better than us, they think they're too gangsta. They're cocky, that's what causes the fights.

"But it's not just them, it's everyone round here. There's nothing else to do so kids fight."

Arthur Gore's Sunshine Mowers looks out on the bus terminal and he says there have been punch-ups between ethnic groups for decades. "As each new group comes in, they seem to pick on them," he says.

"The government just brings them off the boats and planes and drops them here with nothing. They've got a chip on their shoulder, they're arrogant and anything can set 'em off when they're in a group. The African kids are no worse than anyone else. I'm a believer that if you hound them in the paper or on the radio, if you highlight it, it only aggravates the situation. These black kids are used to death and terror and they're bitter on the world for what's been dished out to them, and why wouldn't they be. But it's been going on here for years."

Kali, a 16-year-old Liberian from Kensington visiting friends in West Sunshine, says there's no discrimination when choosing victims either: "You don't have to do anything to get in trouble here. You walk the wrong way, look the wrong way. If they see you are little they pick on you and try to take your stuff.

"Not just Sudanese though," says his friend Sackor, 21. "Asians. New Zealand kids. Aussies."

"You never see a Liberian guy fighting though," observes Kali. "No, 'cos we are little and we are not many," says Sackor.

Richard Deng, 25, fled southern Sudan for Kenya in 1999 after the Khartoum government began targeting his father, a judge. A few months later, troops came in the night, arrested his father and took him away. "He never came back," says Richard, who brought his youngest brother and sister to Australia in June 2003 and is now studying law at Melbourne University and working as an interpreter for Australian Customs. He says the demonisation of Africans over the crimes of a few risks alienating the community, particularly teenagers.

"Like me, most young Sudanese appreciate this country. They want to be Australian, not half-Australian but more Australian. But they need encouragement and support and if they don't get it, what's going to happen. It will turn out badly."

Betty Atong was two when her family fled fighting in Sudan. With only her four-year-old sister and seven-year-old cousin she wound up in Uganda. Her parents went in the other direction and thought she had been killed. It was 16 years before she was able to trace her mother in a refugee camp in Ethiopia, but last year, with help from the Red Cross, she was able to bring her to Australia. No one knows what happened to her father.

"Me, I think I have peace in Australia," she says. "I think I have freedom. But now, with what people are saying about us, I don't see it so much."

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