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Activists Inspire Young Students With Their Tales

Four recipients of the Reebok Human Rights Award urge youths at Carson High to speak out against injustice.

By ANN M. SIMMONS
Times Staff Writer

They came from four different continents, but when the young human rights activists stood before students at Carson High School, they carried a common message:

Regardless of social background and ethnicity, any determined individual can make a difference.

"The main enemy of justice is silence," Carlos Rojas, 29, a Mixe Indian from Mexico, told students gathered this month in Carson's auditorium. "We must all learn to speak out and make our voices heard."

Oddly enough, Rojas' call to arms had the exact opposite effect. But this was a good thing. Rather than raise their voices, the 400 students were silent, visibly captivated. This was no ordinary school assembly.

Rojas has dedicated his life to monitoring and documenting human rights abuses against indigenous and peasant communities in southern Mexico. He was joined by three other activists — Aloysius Toe, 28, of Liberia, Zarema Mukusheva, 30, of Chechnya and 24-year-old Charmy Tong of Myanmar.

All four have embraced a similar life's mission, and they've been chosen to receive this year's Reebok Human Rights Award. The prize, a \$50,000 grant to each recipient, recognizes young activists who have made significant contributions to defending the rights of their fellow citizens and have spread awareness about the cause through nonviolent means.

The four had come to Los Angeles as honorees of the Reebok Human Rights Foundation awards presentation, attended by about 1,400 guests at UCLA's

Royce Hall. Among the guests were actors Cameron Diaz, Lucy Liu and Don Cheadle and singer Peter Dinklage.

The human rights activists were each presented with a glass trophy featuring an embossed figure of a running man breaking through shackles and overcoming obstacles. Liu presented Tong's award. Rojas received his from Diaz.

It's likely that few people at Royce Hall had to be told where to find Chechnya on a map. But at Carson, some students had never heard of the place.

In anticipation of playing host to their overseas guests, 10th- and 11th-graders from Merri Weir's U.S. and world history class designed colorful posters highlighting the attributes of the young activists, giving details about their home countries and posing questions for them.

Not that Carson doesn't have an international feel of sorts. Many of Carson's 3,600-plus students — about 42% — are Latino, with African Americans and Filipinos comprising the next largest groups, about 23% each.

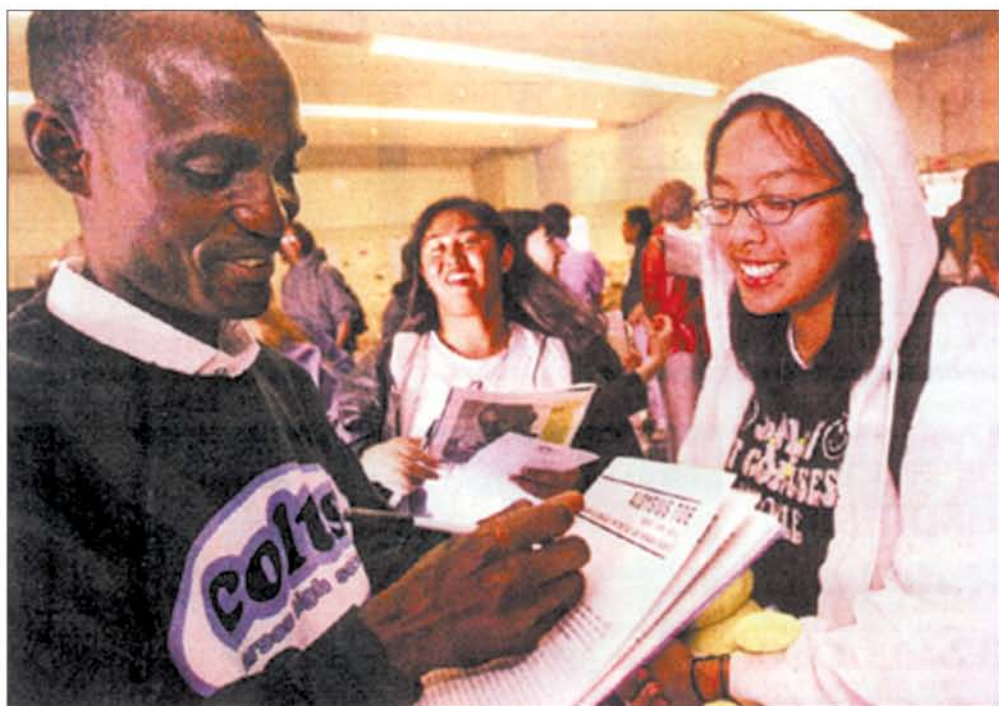
But until the four human rights champions showed up on their campus, some students had no idea of some of the horrors and suffering found around the globe. Before the award winners spoke, they showed short documentaries spotlighting the brutality in their homelands.

Many students appeared stunned by the explicit scenes of violence — boy soldiers beating civilians in Liberia, artillery shells exploding over apartment buildings in Chechnya, bloodied corpses strewn in the streets — images the activists know all too well.

"I never knew that such things really happened," Nina Morente, 15, said after the speech. "I didn't think it was possible people could be that evil."

"It makes me feel really lucky to be living in America," said George Obispo, 11.

Some students gasped as violent images played out on screen. Some



DOING SOMETHING: Aloysius Toe, 28, of Liberia, who will receive a \$50,000 grant from Reebok foundation, gives his autograph to 10th-grader Floreanna Gutierrez at Carson High. He promotes programs aimed at tackling Liberia's poverty.



HONORED: Carlos Rojas, 29, of Mexico, speaks to students.

cheered when the activists recounted how they stood up to authority. But, as happened when Rojas spoke, most students listened quietly, rapt, as the activists told their stories.

When civil war engulfed Liberia, Toe didn't run and hide, he said. He was outraged by the political killings, illegal detentions and growing poverty sweeping his country. Protest typically resulted in arrest — and often death. That didn't silence Toe.

He organized human rights clubs to raise awareness of government abuses and promote human rights education in Liberian schools. His efforts landed him in jail for eight months.

"One of the worst tragedies in existence in human history is the unwillingness to confront evil," said Toe, who now promotes programs aimed at tackling Liberia's poverty. "I will not give up."

Mukusheva shares Toe's passion for exposing the horrors of war.

Her efforts to document civilian casualties in the ongoing conflict between Russia and her homeland of Chechnya — a breakaway region in southern Russia that has been struggling for independence — started one winter day in 1999 as she picked through corpses in a warehouse searching for a missing cousin.

She never found her relative, but she furtively videotaped the carnage. A career documenting the Chechen conflict took root from there.

"Yes, I was very afraid," she said, an interpreter translating her comments from Russian. "But at that exact moment, there was no one else to do this."

What's more, she added: "I feel satisfied ... and grateful when people come

up to me and thank me. It is their actions that encourage me to continue."

Tong also savors the sensation of doing good. Since age 17, she has focused on bringing attention to the abuses committed by the Myanmar military against her native Shan people, an ethnic minority in Myanmar, formerly Burma.

More than 300,000 Shan have been forced from their homes, according to human rights groups. Hundreds struggle to survive as illegal migrant workers in neighboring Thailand.

As a teenager, Tong helped found the Shan Women's Action Network, a group dedicated to stopping the abuse and exploitation of women.

"The Burmese military is using rape as a weapon of war against ethnic Shan women," said Tong, recounting the story of a pregnant Shan woman who was gang raped.

"Would you allow this to happen to your family members?" she asked the students.

"No!" they shouted in unison. The speakers certainly captivated their audience. Through the cheers, the applause, the gasps and that notable silence, there was a feeling of intense concentration, of young minds listening.

"It really inspires you to want to do something," said Ty Doung, 16. "It shows any ordinary person can make a difference."

"And they don't even feel like heroes," chimed in Anthony Echeverria, 15.