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Students push for divestment of Sudanese holdings



FRANCIS BOK, an escaped slave from Sudan, spoke to students last month. Now, some of those students are looking to take action against slavery by advocating divestment from companies that, either directly or indirectly, foster civil war or slavery in Sudan.

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by Kelly Rohrs
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The 200 students who attended a speech by former Sudanese slave Francis Bok in late November went home with an assignment--investigate where their own money is invested and find out whether their financial institutions are investing in organizations that promote unethical activity.

Bok's audience heard his story of being captured from his Sudanese village and forced into slavery for 10 years until he finally escaped. The escaped slave, who now tours the United States as an anti-slavery activist, urged students to get involved in ending modern slavery--a call to action that

some students are now trying to heed.

The students who organized Bok's speech at Duke explained that the University has \$560,000 indirectly invested in PetroChina, an oil company that, through its drilling in Sudan, financially supports the ongoing Sudanese civil war and, therefore, students say, slavery. As part of an effort to address slavery, the organizers are calling both for individual students and the University to examine what their invested money is supporting and, if necessary, divest from certain corporations.

John Solomon, a senior involved in promoting the concept of a University divestment policy, said withdrawing funds from organizations like PetroChina involves more than the situation in Sudan. "We're trying to put this issue of Sudan into a bigger framework," he said. "We're trying to use money and being a shareholder to influence social change."

Solomon's interest in the topic stems from his participation in Associate Professor of Political Science Peter Feaver's fall seminar, Ethics and International Relations. Last semester, the class studied the Sudanese war and alleged human rights violations across the nation. Part of their course was a service-learning project educating the campus about human rights abuse in Sudan and encouraging divestment.

Students in Feaver's class met with President Nan Keohane Dec. 4 to present their concerns about Duke's holdings in PetroChina.

"The major push in this proposal is that this small amount [of money invested in PetroChina] reveals that we as a university have a larger problem--that we don't have an ethical investment policy," said Heather Oh, a senior in the class.

Oh said that although Keohane stressed her limited influence over University investment, the president told the students she would bring up the issue at the next board meeting of Duke University Management Company--which invests Duke's endowment--and would contact the students about the board's response.

Thus far, most of the effort toward a University ethical investment policy has come from members of Feaver's class. Feaver looked into the plausibility of creating a policy before the beginning of the fall semester and helped students gain access to DUMAC records.

"I wanted to find out if this was doable," he said. "I kinda greased the skids on it."

After deciding that an ethical investment policy is viable, Feaver and his class hope to get other students involved, especially because the situation in Sudan encompasses slavery, religious and humanitarian issues.

"For the rest of campus, this has huge emotional resonance," said Jonathan Low, a senior who was in Feaver's class, citing the convergence of causes. He added that he would like to involve other students, but that the logistics are difficult.

"It's hard at this campus to motivate students on issues unless they're really big," Solomon said.

Students have already shown interest about Sudan and divestment. Bok's speech drew 100 more students than expected.

Organizers of the event and the divestment campaign said they were unprepared to involve other students because they did not expect such a passionate response to the issue.

"We had nowhere to tell people to go" to get involved after the Bok speech, Low said. "We missed that opportunity to capitalize on interest."

In his speech, Bok called upon students to educate people that slavery is an ongoing problem and to work to address its causes.

Sophomore Michael Mahdi, who attended the speech, said he was motivated by the issue. "I've been thinking about it ever since [Bok's speech]," he said. "I have to do something but I feel so weak. But I talk to different people and we say, 'Wow, that's tragic,' and we move on."

Mahdi added that he has had difficulty finding ways to get involved. He has visited the anti-slavery website Bok suggested, iAbolish.com, but wants to do more.

"We feel that divestment is the best way to alleviate the slavery issue," Solomon said.

When students met with Keohane, she told them a substantial amount of on-campus interest was necessary to make divesting a reality, said Mariana Carrera, a junior in Feaver's class.

Members of the class hope to sustain the interest they currently see.

"Duke students are so possessive of their time," said Oh, who is also president of the Class of 2003. "That they're willing to take time and commit interest to this--we should take advantage of that."
