

ABDUCTED INTO SLAVERY 200 years ago, driven into exile by civil war in the 1990s and left to languish in camps for more than a decade, Somali Bantus are at last seeing a future with hope.

By the end of next year, as many as 13,000 Bantus are expected to move to the United States from refugee camps in northwestern Kenya. Ohio will become home to more than 400, about half of whom will settle in Columbus.

Most speak little English and know nothing of urban life. Their resettlement will be the most ambitious since thousands of Laotian Hmong farmers arrived 25 years ago after assisting U.S. forces during the Vietnam War.



Binti Ali Abdi, 2, facing thorn bushes her family planted to protect its hut, stares at a group of children who were attracted by the sight of a photographer.

FAR RIGHT: Out of school for a month, Arbay Abdes, 10, visits the adult literacy class in the Kakuma refugee camp. In Kenya, children go to school year-round with a 30-day break every three months. Flies, such as the one on her lip, are everywhere in the camp.

ESCAPING DEATH'S SHADOW

The flight of the Bantus | A SPECIAL REPORT | STORIES BY ENCARNACION PYLE | PHOTOS BY ALYSIA OGLESBY

ESCAPING DEATH'S SHADOW

Living in the camp]



[CHAPTER I



Mud huts with tin roofs and doorways so low that people must stoop to use them are home to refugees at Kakuma. Halimo Abdikadir Gurow is on her way to her outdoor cooking fire.

Sustained by hope

After years spent in camps plagued by crime and poor sanitation, refugees cling to prospect for emigration



KAKUMA, Kenya — Afraid they will fall asleep and miss the bus if they don't keep moving, Halimo Abdikadir Gurow twirls each of her two daughters under a full moon in the unforgiving desert.

Normally, the 21-year-old mother and her family would be sleeping in their one-room, minivan-size mud-and-manure hut, which provides the only relief from 110-degree temperatures during the day.

But this is no ordinary morning, which is why it is so vivid to Gurow:



Omar, 34, and his wife, Gurow, 21, pose with their children, Amina, 4, at left, and Binti, 2. The flour sack on the wall behind them is to keep out insects and wind-whipped dirt.



Washing precedes the 4 p.m. prayer for Ali Abdi Omar, who is Muslim.

After more than seven years in refugee camps in northern Kenya, Gurow; her husband, Ali Abdi Omar, 34; and their daughters — Amina Ali Abdi, 4, and Binti Ali Abdi, 2 — are about to embark on a new life in a new country.

They're among 35 giddy Somali Bantus who started gathering under a picnic shelter at 2 a.m. for a late-morning bus to Nairobi, where they will catch a plane to an unimaginable future.

"We're going to *O-HI-O!*" Gurow shouts, only the last word in English. Never mind that she knows little about the Buckeye State.

She grew up on a small plantation in southern Somalia without electricity or indoor plumbing. She measures time by droughts and plagues and visits medicine men for blessings, cures and fortunes.

Somali Bantus might be the closest thing to a countryless people. Two centuries ago, their ancestors were abducted

from Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania and sold as slaves in Somalia.

Even after slavery was abolished, the Somali Bantus were never really free. Treated as pariahs, they were kept out of schools, relegated to manual labor and taunted as *adoons* (slaves) and *goshas* (forest dwellers).

When civil war erupted in 1991, the Bantus had no clan affiliation and thus no means of protection. Roving rebels forced the Bantus to keep farming, pillaged their harvests and raped and killed their families.

Once a curse, their identity as a persecuted people now has become their ticket out of Kakuma, one of the oldest and largest refugee camps in the world.

Daily suffering

Intended as a way station, the camp 75

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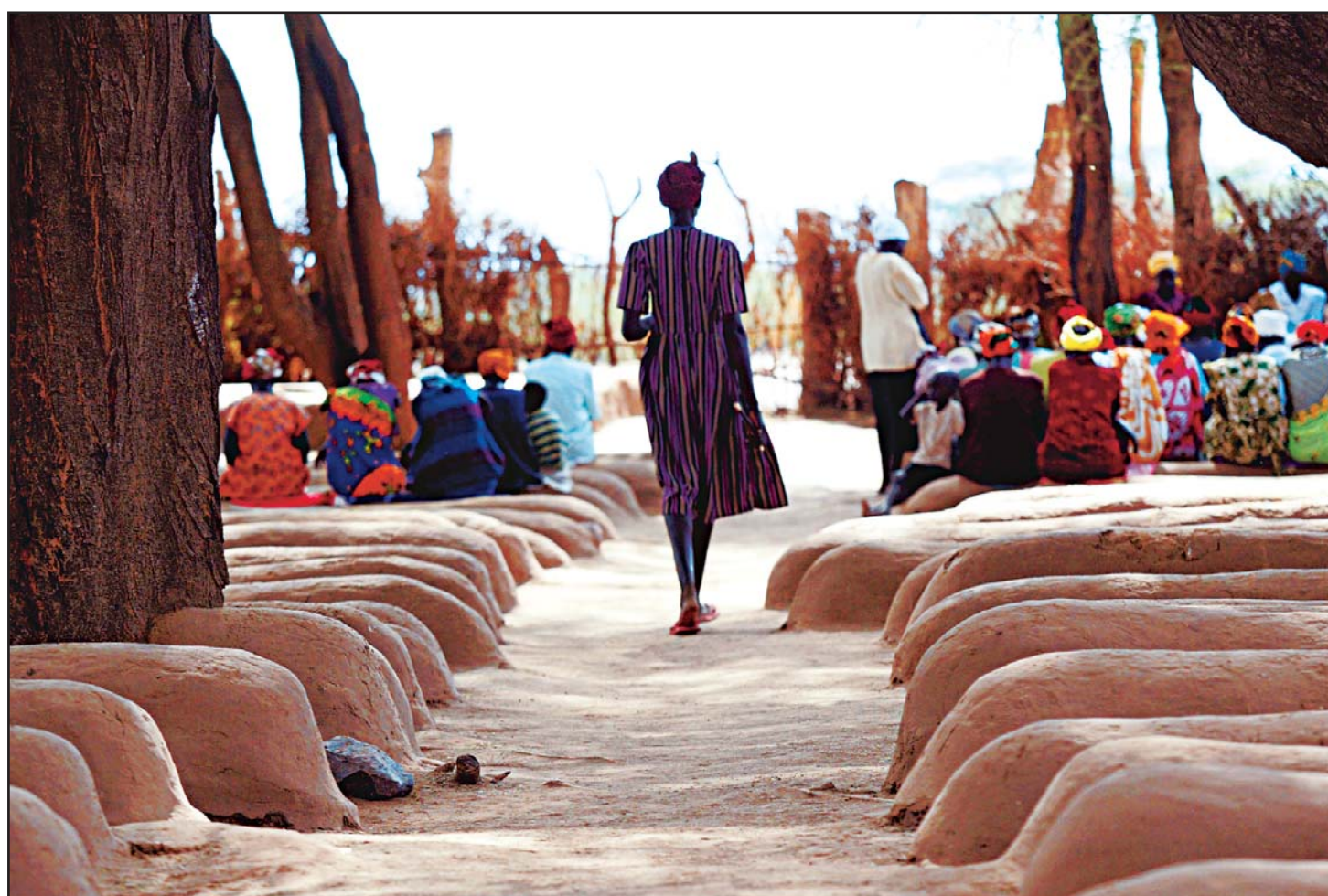
Nearly 90,000 people live in the Kakuma camp, which covers 4.6 square miles of desert in Kenya. A portion of it can be seen from atop the camp water tower.



ABOVE: Refugees must go to communal areas for water. Fatuma Salah, 4, drinks from this spigot in the International Organization for Migration compound at Kakuma.



RIGHT: Inside the Kakuma camp, 12-year-old Noor Sidali Ambure, left, and Amina Abdikadir Mohamed, 11, collect ground corn at Musa Engeze's store.



Mounds of dirt serve as pews for the open-air Episcopal church in the Sudanese section of Kakuma.

miles from the Sudanese border has become a human warehouse. Camel spiders bigger than a man's fist and poisonous scorpions outnumber the nearly 90,000 Ethiopian, Somali, Sudanese and other African refugees who call the camp home.

From January through August, there were 11 homicides in the camp, as well as reports of four rapes, 32 assaults, 20 robberies and 12 riots that broke out while food was being distributed, according to Charles Odhiambo, a Kenyan who coordinates security for the International Organization for Migration, based in Geneva. The group is handling the resettlement of the Bantus.

Seven million of the world's 9.7 million refugees have lived in such camps for more than 10 years. Many will never leave.

Since last October, Gurow has participated in dozens of festive, all-night send-offs for family and friends headed to America. Because of the history of persecution of the Bantus, the U.S. State Department declared

them eligible in 2000 for priority refugee processing. Several attempts by the United Nations to resettle them in their native lands had failed.

In the camps, the Bantus are still treated like slaves and forced to do 90 percent of the hard labor. Other refugees make them build homes, collect water and dig latrines. They scour blackened pots at restaurants, serve up steaming beverages in tearooms and sew garments using foot-powered Singer machines in stalls covered in chicken wire.

Gurow's husband has heard that their experience parallels that of former slaves in America's Deep South until the civil-rights movement of the 1960s changed society.

"I pray for a similar outcome," he said. Bringing as many as 13,000 Somali Bantus to the United States will be one of the largest and most-ambitious resettlements since 200,000 Laotian Hmong were brought here after the Vietnam War.

Omar can't believe that it is finally his family's turn.

"The day I set foot in Cleveland will be the most beautiful day of my life," he said later through an interpreter. He recalled the thumping of hide-covered wooden drums that had celebrated their departure:

Overcome by excitement, Gurow had jumped up from a tree stump, stamped her feet and swayed her hips to the hypnotic music.

Unable to keep their eyes open, the girls had curled up next to each other on a straw mat at their parents' feet.

Gnarled old men and women, their eyes clouded by cataracts, had offered words of advice, Omar said, as they drank hot sweetened tea mixed with milk:

*Stay honest and work hard.
Shower daily.
Don't succumb to the urge to take a second wife. It isn't allowed in America.*

Unable to picture what awaited them in

the strange, faraway land, Omar was certain of only one thing: "It has to be better than the past."

Terrifying trail

He and his family once lived on a 400-acre farm that hugged the Juba River in southern Somalia. They grew coconuts, corn, guavas, mangoes and other fruits and vegetables. But their peace was disrupted in 1992, a year after civil war ended Siad Barre's 22-year dictatorship, when Somali rebels invaded the town.

Militiamen beat Omar and the others with rifle butts and rocks until they were sticky with blood. They stripped and raped a neighbor in front of her horrified husband. They killed Omar's mother and forced him to carry more than a dozen back-breaking sacks of corn to their hide-out.

"We were targeted by rebels because of our kinky hair, flat noses and full lips," Omar said in a voice slightly louder than a whisper. "We were looted, shot at and killed. I'll have nightmares, replaying the horrors, the rest of my life."

Gurow, Omar and their families escaped with only the tattered clothes on their backs. They walked 17 days to Mogadishu in flip-flops, subsisting on bits of stale bread and sleeping along the rocky road, hiding in the elephant grass.

During the next several years, they wandered from one village to another, living with friends and relatives until poverty and drought forced them to move on.

In 1997, the 20 extended families joined a column of refugees headed to Kenya. By the time they crossed through the border town of Liboi, half a dozen children had died of hunger, and a baby boy had been carried away by a hyena.

Kenyan soldiers welcomed the families with beans, rice and water. Workers with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees loaded them into trucks for a dusty trip to a camp in Dadaab.

A sand-blown settlement of nomadic camel- and goat-herders in northeastern Kenya, Dadaab is home to 145,000 refugees. Bandits with automatic weapons, cattle rustlers and interclan clashes plague Dadaab's three camps — Dagahaley, Hagadera and Ifo.

Gurow and Omar, after being married, moved into a Somali *turkul*, a dome-shaped, grass-thatched house that provided little protection from the equatorial sun and

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stinging seasonal rains.

Of all her duties, Gurow most hated walking as far as 3 miles into the arid bush in search of firewood. She always made it home safely but knows women who were raped and then ostracized from the community.

"There's no greater dishonor," she said, her eyes downcast.

After the United States began paying to have firewood distributed in the camp in 1998, the rape rate dropped from one a day to one every two to three days.

Although they were glad to be alive and among friends, Gurow and Omar resented that other refugees saw them as poor, ignorant and helpless.

To prove them wrong, Omar started taking classes to learn English. Having never attended school, neither he nor his wife can read or write in their native tongue, Maay Maay.

Mastering a new language remains his biggest concern.

"It worries me so much I can't sleep," Omar said. "But I hear USA is a land of equality, opportunity and prosperity. I'm told there is nothing you can't accomplish if you want it enough. And I want it."

Jealous neighbors

Because Dadaab is about 50 miles west of Somalia, a lawless country with only a transitional government, U.S. immigration officials considered it too dangerous to send in resettlement workers. So in 2002, relief workers moved the Bantu refugees to Kakuma, a camp 900 miles west.

Life is no easier in Kakuma, a desert dotted with thorn bushes, flat-topped acacia and bottle-shaped baobab trees.

Separated by blocks of homes that surround courtyards, inhabitants from nine African countries live in an uneasy truce. They all suffer crime, flooding, a near total lack of economic opportunity, poor relations with the native Kenyan Turkanas and frequent food shortages.

The Kenyan government prohibits refugees from growing crops, raising livestock or leaving the region.

A melee between Turkanas and Sudanese Dinka refugees in June 2003 left 14 people dead. The government reinforced police patrols in the camp with the feared General Service Unit, a paramilitary force trained by Israeli soldiers to fight terrorism.

"I pray for the day that my daughters can play safely outside without fear of being kidnapped, raped or shot," Omar said.

Refugees complain that the Turkanas sneak into the camp at night to rape and rob. The refugees plant thorn bushes as barricades around their homes for limited protection.

The Turkanas say the refugees compete with them for scarce resources, receive better assistance from the international community during droughts and floods, and have a higher standard of living. Since the March rains failed, many Turkanas walk as far as 50 miles in blistering heat to sell goats for a few shillings each to feed their families.

Bustling marketplace

Despite constraints, some refugees thrive in the camp.

In kiosks and stalls, they stand vigil over audiocassettes, Western shirts and tennis shoes.

Butchers and barbers jockey with restaurants and satellite-phone vendors for prime real estate. Kids wearing oversized T-shirts sporting pictures of American rappers 50 Cent and Nelly hawk brown chicken eggs as their parents sell withered vegetables and papayas from rickety handcarts.

Pop music blares in the streets. Men in flowing plaid *ma'awis* (a traditional wrap-around cloth similar to a kilt) and sandals made from old tires sit in makeshift cafes watching BBC and CNN broadcasts in English. And bicycle taxis jostle with pedestrians and small herds of donkeys, goats and sheep for right of way.

"The camp's prosperous local marketplace is testament to the resilience and creativity of people living under difficult and traumatic circumstances, for Kakuma is a hard place to be a refugee," said Jason Phillips, an American who is country director for the International Rescue Committee's Kenya program.

Camp existence doesn't have to be bleak, said Bekele Ayalew Kassa, 31. "Life is what you make it."

A former mathematics student in Ethiopia, Kassa borrowed 5,000 Kenyan shillings (\$63) from one of the humanitarian groups and opened a small restaurant in 1997. Business has more than doubled since then.

Kassa dreams of the day he can open an eatery in Atlanta, where his wife and newborn son, Tamer ("miracle"), wait for him.

Yet for many, the camp is a prison. "It's worse than hell," said Mulugela Dade Kusa, a 27-year-old Ethiopian refugee who has lived in Kakuma for a decade. "The schools are too crowded. There are few jobs. Meals come once a day. And I have no future."

Final goodbyes

Most days in the camp for Omar and Gurow were like one that he described shortly before they left for Nairobi: Omar arose before 5 a.m. from a single twin bed in the one-room hut he shared with his family. Gurow hugged the girls close to her as they slept on a straw mat on the floor.

Blue-and-white U.N. tarps and sacks that once held U.S.-donated grain were stretched



LEFT: Her 7-month-old son, Saleimani Hamadi, on her back, Asha Ali, 25, picks up three bags — corn, flour and beans — at a food-distribution center in the refugee camp.

BELOW: A camel sells for \$125 to \$230 in the camp. Men slaughtering it described the meat as sweet.

taut across cracks in the walls to keep out insects.

A devout Muslim, Omar pressed his face into the gritty sand and offered his first prayer of the day. The haze of a cooking fire shrouded his figure.

Down the road, Shaibu Ahmed, a 48-year-old butcher, slit the throat of a wailing camel so it could bleed to death in accordance with Islamic law. A single tear ran down the beast's face as life drained from its body. Ahmed and three other Somali Bantus had bought it from a Turkana herdsman for 10,000 shillings (\$125).

An inspector examined the meat for cirrhosis of the liver, worms and other parasites. Given the OK, it could be ground and grilled into a spicy dish called *kofita*.

"Business has been bad since so many Bantus started leaving for America," Ahmed lamented through an interpreter. "I used to be able to sell my quarter of camel by midday. Now it takes me until 6 p.m. or early the next day."

Back at their hut, Gurow stirred porridge over a smoldering charcoal fire as Omar tickled Amina and Binti before heading off on his bike to taxi people around the 4.6-square-mile camp.

"It's hot, tiring work, but if I'm lucky I will make 200 shillings (\$2.50) so I can buy a little sugar, milk, vegetables or maybe even a little meat," he said wistfully.

Omar pedaled past a nursery where herbs are grown, a center where teenagers with babies can complete their schooling and a small building where refugees are counseled for depression, post-traumatic stress and psychosomatic disorders.

Beside the road were signs in English: *Real men educate their women. Say no to torture and cruel treatment of children. Peace is our responsibility.*



"These are all good lessons for people starting new lives," Omar told his first passenger of the day.

In late afternoon, Gurow stood patiently in an orderly queue at the food-distribution center. It snaked back and forth more times than a line for the most popular ride at Cedar Point. A man checked her dirty, dog-eared ration card before sending her down the line to pick up a small supply of oil, flour, dried corn and red beans.

Like water and firewood, food is perpetually in short supply, and refugees rarely receive the United Nations minimum standard of 2,168 calories a day.

Down the road, women in wraparound *diraas* worn over petticoats carried jerrycans of slightly brown water on their heads. Children laughed when their pickup soccer game created a mini dust storm.

As night fell, Omar hurried home, alert to the crack of gunfire in the distance. Gurow had prepared plain rice because beans would take more charcoal than her family had.

Later, they were startled awake by the wail

of a woman whose daughter had been stung by a scorpion and by the distant siren of an ambulance that would take the child to the camp's single, overcrowded hospital.

Thus had been their life, Omar said — day after day, year after year.

Until, Gurow recalled, the day that special bus arrived:

On this cool morning, Omar and Gurow stand in disbelief, a sleepy child at each side.

They have answered the questions of immigration officials. They have undergone physicals. And they have taken a crash course in American culture.

They also have talked about the opportunities ahead.

Omar dreams that his daughters will become a pilot and a professor. Gurow simply delights in the foreign notion of choosing a future.

At last, a growing dust cloud in the distance announces the bus to Nairobi and the first leg of their journey to Cleveland.

"There's no looking back," Omar tells his wife. "There's only the future now."

An anguished past

The Somali Bantus who started settling in Columbus this year have endured a history of enslavement and marginalization.

LIFE AFTER SLAVERY

1860 | Many Somali Bantus escape slavery and attempt to return to Tanzania, their traditional homeland. Others settle in the fertile Juba River Valley of Somalia where they live as farmers. They are treated as a marginalized minority. Access to schooling, land ownership and business opportunities is denied. They may not marry other Somalis.

1900 | About 35,000 fugitive slaves are living in the Juba River Valley. Slavery is officially abolished by the Italian colonial authorities, but the Bantus are forced to abandon their farms and live in villages around Italian plantations until the 1930s.

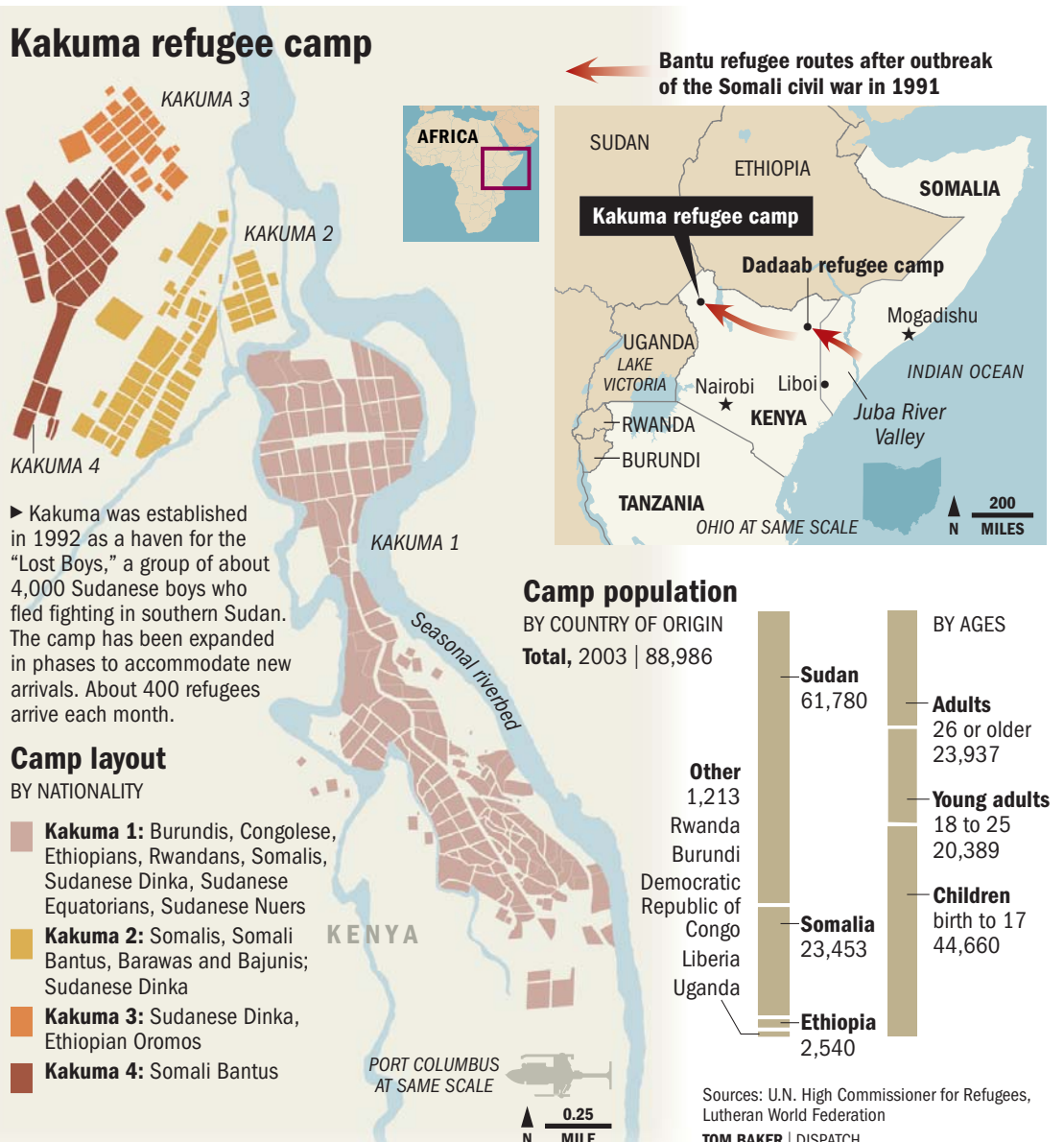
1960 | Somalia gains independence from the British, who controlled the area after World War II. Although the government declares that tribalism and clan differences should be abolished, overt discrimination against the Bantus continues.

FLIGHT FROM CIVIL WAR

1991 | Civil war breaks out after the collapse of Siad Barre's regime. The Bantus are excluded from the traditional Somali clan protection network and have no weapons and no means of protection. Bandits and militias attack the Bantus, stealing food and robbing, raping and murdering Bantu farmers.

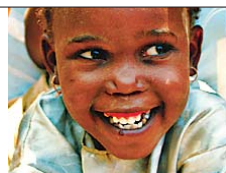
1992 | Somalis seek refuge in Tanzania, but the Tanzanian government changes its stance after absorbing refugees from war-torn Rwanda. Others begin pouring across the Kenyan border to the Dadaab refugee camp.

1992 | 11,860 Somali Bantu refugees are transferred from Dadaab to the Kakuma refugee camp.



ESCAPING DEATH'S SHADOW

Preparing to leave]



[CHAPTER 2



LEFT: Sharing a laugh during an adult literacy class at Kakuma are, from left, Imadina Ali, 25; Hanema Saladi, 25; and Muna Ibrahim, 18.

ABOVE: Some Somali Bantu mothers put cloth diapers on their children, but others dress them only in T-shirts. A lesson in using disposable diapers is part of the mothers' class in Kakuma. The teacher is Nuria Golo Abdi, who is diapering 2-month-old Fodan Hassan.

BELOW: Learning to read English is a challenge for the Bantus, many of whom cannot read or write their own language. Teacher Jeilani Hassan Eman leads a literacy class covering the basics.

Lessons in survival

Bantus prepare for the road ahead by learning intricacies of the American way of life



KAKUMA, Kenya — She hates what she is about to do, but Nuria Golo Abdi says it's best for her students. She waits for the knocking. *Thump, thump, thump.* She opens the door to see 37-year-old Fatuma Mude Adan. *Bam!* Abdi slams the door. "Come on, Fatuma. You can do it," she urges in Somali. "Turn the handle and push it open." Adan pulls at the door with all her might, beads of sweat forming on her brow. "Push. Don't pull. Push," Abdi encourages her. *Creeaaaak.* Adan struts into the white-washed, dirt-walled classroom with a grin that says, "I did it!" So goes the first lesson of the day for the three dozen Somali Bantu women in the mothers' class, which meets in the International Organization for Migration compound. Surrounded by barbed wire, the compound is next to the refugee camp where the women live. Families spend months preparing for a new life in a new country. Still, Ali Abdi Omar wonders if he and his wife, Halimo Abdikadir Gurow, and their two daughters will be ready for life in Cleveland. "It's a little scary," he says through an interpreter. The biggest challenge for relief workers in Africa is preparing refugees, many of whom can't read or write their own language, for

the United States. But rarely is the gap as wide as the one the Bantus must bridge on their way to the United States. "America is as foreign to them as any place on Earth could be," said Omar Eno, director of the National Somali Bantu Project at Portland State University in Oregon. Most of the Bantus have lived their entire lives in mud huts without electricity or indoor plumbing. They've never turned a doorknob, used a stove or flushed a toilet. Only 1 percent speak any English, and only 35 percent are semiliterate in any language, according to the International Rescue Committee, based in New York, which runs the camp literacy program. A majority of the Bantus arrived in refugee camps with only the clothes on their backs. "They struggled just to survive," said Eno, a Bantu who created the project in 2003 to work with resettlement groups that help Bantus assimilate into American life. "But they have a strong sense of family and community, want to work and adapt easily under extreme conditions." **Pampers and PBJ** Viewed as second-class citizens, women in Africa have even fewer opportunities than men do. The women in Abdi's classes have had little or no schooling. Nearly all, including several 15-year-old girls, are pregnant or nursing. Bantus typically have four to eight chil-

dren, and the average age for marriage is 16. "My children have learned more in the camps than I have in a lifetime," Adan says in her native tongue, Maay Maay, with Abdi interpreting. "The world is about to open up to them in the United States." For now, though, it's Adan and the other mothers' opportunity to learn. Standing next to a dry-erase board, Abdi asks for volunteers. Dahabo Mohamed Said bravely walks to the front of the classroom and proclaims in English: "I can count 1-2-3, up to 50." "How's your writing?" Abdi asks. "Not so good," Said says, looking sheepishly at her feet. That's all right. Abdi persuades Said to write her name. *Bahawb Ahmed Said*, she writes. "Good start. Let's do it together by sounding it out," Abdi says. "Daa-ha-bo. D-A-H-A-B-O. Dahabo!" After a fit of giggles, the women scan the classroom. A multicolored map of the United States hangs on one wall. "Where would you like to live?" Abdi asks. The women shout: "Arizona!" "California!" "Columbus!" Abdi points to a poster of U.S. coins. "Which is worth more money, a nickel or a quarter?" she quizzes. "The quarter!" yells Maluun Haji Abdul-

lahi, 37, while jumping up and down. "It's as good as five nickels." But it's the wondrous conveniences — the kitchen faucet that fills a glass with clean water, the stove that heats without firewood and the toilet that flushes away waste — that evoke the most excitement. For years, the women have walked hundreds of yards to wells and even farther for firewood, risking attack. They've used communal latrines or gone in the open when away from their huts. And they've lived for as long as 13 years on beans, corn, flour, oil and salt, never using a refrigerator. "America is a magical land," Makay Saleiman Osman, 32, says as she boils water on a stove. "But it is so strange," Jeamea Mohamed Eman, 18, chimes in while holding the string of a swinging tea bag in her hand. "How could you ever get a strong cup of tea from such a small, little bag? Can I bring my Somali teapot and my deep-fryer?" After washing dishes, the women taste and react to a variety of American foods. Wheat cereal for babies: *Disgusting.* Cake mix: *Yum.* Peanut butter and jelly: "Is that tomato?" one woman asks of the strawberry jam. "Go ahead. Don't be afraid. Try it," Abdi coaxes. *Chewy. Sticky. Bad for adults but good for kids.*

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LEFT: Spaghetti and bananas make a tasty meal for Binti Ali Abdi, left, and her sister, Amina, who are sitting on the dining room table in their new apartment. The family had just arrived in Cleveland.

ABOVE: Ali Abdi Omar hands his daughter Binti to his brother, Abdiraman Hussain, as they arrive in Cleveland.



ABOVE: A lollipop is an unexpected treat for Binti as her family shops for groceries in Cleveland.

RIGHT: Her brow furrowed by all the choices, Halimo Abdikadir Gurow shops with her husband in Cleveland. In the cart is their 4-year-old daughter, Amina.



"You will not recognize 99 percent of the food in American supermarkets," Abdi tells the women. "Even when you do, it won't be the same."

She holds up a can of chickpeas and asks, "What's this?"

"Whatever it is, I won't be satisfied, even if I'm given four cans," Jamila Ibrahim Osman, 70, says with a deep laugh. "Are you sure there is enough food in America?"

The class cleans up and moves to diaper training.

Laying a hot-pink baby blanket on the table, Abdi asks for a volunteer. Two women run outside to a green tent where several refugees and Turkana women are caring for the students' children. Ready to breast-feed, the babies scream when handed to Abdi. She suggests that they pick a child who is sleeping. Two-month-old Fodan Hassan fills the bill.

The women squeeze in for a better view as Abdi pulls out a disposable diaper.

"Is that a Pampers?" Fodan's 17-year-old aunt, Fatuma Musa Abshir, asks in wide-eyed awe. "Wow."

They've all heard about the marvels of Pampers.

With calm efficiency, Abshir unsnaps Fodan's pajamas and removes the blue-and-white checkered cloth diaper his mother washes over and over. But she hesitates with the disposable diaper.

"It's so clean," she says. "Do we really want to get it dirty?"

Another woman asks, "Can it be washed and used again?"

During the course of the week, Abdi will teach the students other practical knowledge, such as how to fill a bathtub, make ice cubes and set an alarm clock. They'll also learn about U.S. geography, government, history, people and weather, as well as education, employment, health care and money management.

Conversation drills

On the other side of the camp, the International Rescue Committee teaches 8-month-long "survival literacy" courses in English; Swahili, the national language of Kenya; and math, which includes instruction in telling time and using a calendar.

The two-hour sessions — taught three times a day — are separated into beginning, intermediate and advanced skills.

Since 1995, about 7,800 people have participated in the survival and skills-training program, says Ukash Ali Ahmed, 24, who heads the program. "It may sound like such

Traditionally, women with babies younger than 40 days old stay indoors to protect the children from evil spirits. But 23-year-old Habibo Ismail Maalim doesn't want to miss class, so she grips a nail in her hand as the medicine man advised her.

a small feat, but 80 percent of the community can now read and write their names. That's a big deal."

It's only 10 a.m., but the small, clay-walled classroom already is a sauna. A slight breeze blows through the open windows, coating everything and everyone with a thin layer of burnt-sienna dust. About a dozen adults, mostly women, and two dozen children sit in a silent daze. Like all children in Kenya, the refugee kids go to school year-round, with a 30-day break every three months.

With a piece of chalk in his hand, teacher Jeilani Hassan Eman, a Somali Bantu himself, stands at a blackboard worn from use.

"Have you seen Mr. Osman?" he reads in a singsong voice.

"Repeat," Eman says with a drill sergeant's command.

"Have you seen Mr. Osman?" the class says in unison.

"Again."

"Have you seen Mr. Osman?"

"Again."

"Have you seen Mr. Osman?"

"No, when has he arrived?" Eman says.

"He arrived yesterday. I will visit him tomorrow."

A woman with a newborn baby in a sling on her back furiously copies the conversation into a composition book.

Traditionally, women with babies younger than 40 days old stay indoors to protect the children from evil spirits. But 23-year-old Habibo Ismail Maalim doesn't want to miss class, so she grips a nail in her hand as the medicine man advised her.

"I want to make a good life for myself,

maybe become a teacher myself," Maalim explains.

The class continues practicing conversations, many of which have a moral.

"Have you circumcised your daughter?" Eman asks.

"I have not circumcised my daughter," Hanema Saladi, 25, answers with the response she has been taught.

"What will happen if you circumcise your daughter?" he asks.

"You will be deported," Saladi says.

Oblivious to the lesson, 2-year-old Aden Somow, covered with dirt, sits near Saladi's feet on the bare floor, gleefully ripping up his mommy's workbook.

American daze

After their camp training, the refugees travel by bus to Nairobi, where as many as 400 at a time spend anywhere from a day to two months in a bare-bones, dormitorylike "transit center" operated by the humanitarian group Goal Kenya. The travelers rest for the flight to the United States and learn about navigating the airport and immigration and customs.

Halimo Abdikadir Gurow and her family will be leaving for Cleveland in four days.

"What a world of difference from the camp," she says in amazement. "It's so much better here. It's not as hot. It's not as dusty. And my children can play outside."

Her two daughters — Amina and Binti — also have noticed a difference.

"The girls asked me why we left our house," Gurow says. "I told them we're going to a better home in America."

Her husband, Ali Abdi Omar, takes comfort in knowing that whatever challenges he and his family may face, their friends and relatives who moved to Cleveland weeks earlier will show them the way.

On Aug. 30, the family flies to Brussels, then to Newark, N.J. They finally touch down at Cleveland Hopkins International Airport 28 hours after boarding their first flight.

Caseworkers for the nonprofit Migration and Refugee Services greet the tired family members, who stand out in their gray sweat shirts issued earlier by the U.S. Refugee Program.

"Is everyone feeling OK? You're not too dehydrated?" asks Marjean Perhot, director of the Catholic Charities Services program, while feeling Binti's forehead.

Omar breaks into a smile after seeing three of his relatives standing behind Per-

hot. Together, they walk downstairs to the luggage conveyor to collect the family's possessions, all of which are packed in a small nylon suitcase.

More than a dozen relatives, including Gurow's sister, Isha, 14, and mother, Nahiya Shalongo, 45, surprise the family members in their new apartment, with tears and shouts of joy.

"This is the happiest day of my life," Shalongo says, pulling Amina and Binti close to her. "Coming to America was the best thing that could have happened to me. But it is better now that my family is here."

The family is overwhelmed again and again during the next several days by caseworkers, neighbors and do-gooders heaping advice on them:

*Cook on the stove.
Hang clothes in the closet.
Wipe the shower dry.*

*Organize your cupboards.
Sweep the floor after eating.
Windex cleans glass.*

*Throw out the trash in the Dumpster.
Turn off the television when you go to bed.
Be careful unclogging the garbage disposal.*

"There's so much to remember and so much to do," Gurow says.

Still, during their first grocery-shopping outing at Save-A-Lot, they aren't as surprised by the bounty as they expected to be.

"This is America; there is supposed to be a lot of variety," Omar says, filling a cart with nearly a dozen bunches of bananas and plantains, a bag of apples, several onions and a 5-pound sack of Idaho potatoes.

What proves more challenging is operating the carts — Omar and Gurow both have one with a daughter in each — without running into aisles piled high with bottles of ketchup, mayonnaise, pickles and salad dressing.

"Is this her first time?" a shopper asks Skender Demiri, the case manager chaperoning the family.

Demiri nods. "Just don't put her behind the wheel anytime soon," the woman says with a laugh, as Gurow cuts a corner and plows into a stack of paper towels.

Undaunted, Gurow tells Demiri that she can't wait until their next adventure.

"I like it here," she says. "With time, I'm going to go to school, learn English, get a job and learn to drive. I am a survivor."

ESCAPING DEATH'S SHADOW

[*The flight of the Bantus*]



Gates and barbed wire protect the International Organization for Migration compound at Kakuma. Refugees are allowed inside by appointment for such things as classes and medical exams.

Resettlement quotas seldom met



The sun rises at 6:30 a.m. as some Somali Bantus doze on the bus taking them to an airstrip in nearby Lodwar, where they will board a plane to Nairobi.

Every year, millions of people are displaced by war, famine and civil unrest. They flee their homelands to escape death or torture at the hands of oppressors.

Some eventually go home. Many don't. Less than 1 percent of the world's refugees are resettled in other countries each year.

Meanwhile, 72 percent of the 9.7 million refugees worldwide have lived in camps or secluded settlements for more than 10 years. At the start of this year, humanitarian groups counted 38 situations in the world that they considered warehousing of people. Most refugees are in Africa (2.3 million), the Middle East (about 2 million) and Southeast Asia (600,000).

"Think of that: 7 million people who have each forfeited a decade of human potential," said Sen. Sam Brownback, a Kansas Republican who has frequently called on the president to increase refugee admissions.

The fallout from the Sept. 11 attack and the subsequent war on terrorism severely constricted the world's resettlement program.

The number of people being resettled worldwide plunged by 56 percent after 2001 but is rising now. In the United States, 52,868 refugees were admitted during the federal fiscal year that ended Sept. 30 — nearly 76 percent of the 70,000 federal limit.

They hail from as many as 50 countries.

By contrast, a record-setting 207,116 moved here in 1980 after Congress approved national standards for resettling refugees.

The United States, Canada, Australia and six countries in Western Europe — Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland — lead the way in embracing the downtrodden. The United States takes more than all the other countries combined — 56 percent of refugees resettled last year.

Each year, the 17 countries that regularly participate in the U.N. resettlement program declare a quota for refugees from each continent. The quotas generally are not filled, because the United Nations doesn't have the money to process the applicants.

To gain refugee status, people must prove to U.N. workers that they have a "well-founded fear of persecution," based on membership in a social group or nationality, politics, race or religion.

Those coming to the United States face screening by the Department of Homeland Security to weed out criminals, drug addicts and potential terrorists.

"Terrorists would not come through the U.S. refugee program," said Sasha Chanoff, executive director of Partners Without Bor-



Osman Mahdi Yerow, 37, comforts his 1-year-old son, Ismail Osman Mahdi, on the plane to Nairobi. At left is his 8-year-old son, Abdirahman Osman Mahdi.

ders, a humanitarian group in Nairobi. "There are much easier ways: student and work visas, for one."

Background checks and interviews by U.S. caseworkers can be frustrating because many refugees don't have passports or identification documents. Some fled their war-torn countries without them. In Somalia, few people ever had official papers.

In camps, refugees learn that they have been selected to move to another country by seeing their names on bulletin boards. To those traveling to the United States, the government lends money for one-way plane tickets at a typical cost of about \$5,000 per family.

Once in the country, they are placed with one of 10 national social-service groups, such as Jewish Family Services in Columbus, to help them find housing and get settled.

Officials from the national groups meet with the State Department weekly to determine how many refugees of each nationality they can take and which cities they can go to. The decision is based on such factors as whether the agency has staff members who speak the language and how much experi-

ence the agency has had with that nationality. For example, Laotian Hmong are being sent to California's Central Valley, Minnesota, North Carolina and Wisconsin, where 200,000 Hmong-Americans already live. Somali Bantus are being resettled in about 50 cities, including Columbus, where agencies have said they are able to help them.

Refugees with family in the United States go to states where those relatives live and are helped by the social-service groups there.

There are no caps on the number of immediate relatives (spouses, minor children and parents) admitted each year, and states cannot refuse to take a person. Once in the United States, refugees often move to join family and friends in other cities.

The government expects refugees to become self-supporting as soon as possible and to begin repaying the cost of their air travel within six months. Most families chip away at the debt, paying \$35 to \$50 a month.

Large families that have lived for years in refugee camps often need welfare, Medicaid and food stamps for at least a year. Refugees are expected to eventually apply for U.S. citizenship.

The chosen

Circumstances and ethnicity determine a refugee's chances of being resettled in the United States. Here are the proposed priorities for 2005:

► **Priority 1:** Individual cases of protection identified and referred by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, a U.S. embassy or a humanitarian group. This could include people who have been threatened or tortured, or are physically or mentally disabled or in need of urgent medical care.

► **Priority 2:** Populations of special concern to the United States, including Cubans, Soviets and Vietnamese, as well as Burundians in Tanzania, Iranian religious minorities in Austria, Laotian Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok camp in Thailand, Liberians in Ghana and Guinea, Meskhetian Turks in Russia, Somali Benadir in Kenya, Somalis in Uganda and Vietnamese in the Philippines.

Also being considered are Bhutanese in Nepal, Burmese in camps along the Thailand border, Ethiopians in Yemen and Kunama in Ethiopia.

The 5,000 Somali Bantus still expected to be in Kenya at year's end also will be resettled under this designation.

► **Priority 3:** Relatives — parents, spouses and unmarried children — of people from select countries who already have been granted asylum. The countries include Burundi, Colombia, Congo, the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), Cuba, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Haiti, Iran, Liberia, Myanmar (Burma), Rwanda, Somalia and Sudan.

Source: U.S. State Department

Suddenly, everyone wants to be Bantu

KAKUMA, Kenya — Owanza should be in the United States by now. Instead, she and her four children, frightened for their lives, are in cramped quarters behind razor wire next to this refugee camp's main police station.

The 27-year-old single mother didn't commit a crime. She simply told humanitarian workers that another refugee had threatened to kill her children if she didn't smuggle out one of his kids.

So she and her children now are separated from the rest of the camp to protect them from retaliation. Even though relief workers believe her story, they have to prove to the U.S. government that she did nothing wrong and is still eligible to come to America.

Since the United States announced its decision four years ago to take in persecuted Somali Bantus, thousands of other exiled refugees have been bribing and bullying legal applicants for tickets to America.

"He told me he'd beat my children lifeless, then burn down the house," said Owanza, who gave a Kenyan nickname instead of her Bantu name, for fear of being found.

"Going to America is the holy grail of refugee life," said Sasha Chanoff, of Boston, who worked for nine years for the International Organization for Migration, based in Geneva. "People will cajole, bribe, threaten and kill for the opportunity. I've heard stories of refugees being threatened at gunpoint the night before they were supposed to leave the camps."

Other Somali minorities who fled civil war and tyranny with the Bantus are frustrated about being left behind in the camps.

"People are desperate," said John Walburn, a British citizen who heads the migration organization's office in Kakuma. "The line between starting a new life or being condemned to a lifetime of exile for these refugees is very thin."

For example, the Somali Bajunis, like the Bantus, have been discriminated against and treated as outsiders, but they are not a priority to emigrate.

"During the war in Somalia, I was robbed twice and had one of my arms cut off," Mohamed Abdula Malambo, a 38-year-old Bajuni, said through an interpreter. "Haven't I suffered enough? I'd do almost anything to start over."

"I want to live in a country where I can breathe fresh, clean air — not deadly doses of dried feces whipped up by desert gusts," said Mwanaisha Mohammed, a 40-year-old Bajuni. "Will it ever be my turn to go?"

Complicated process

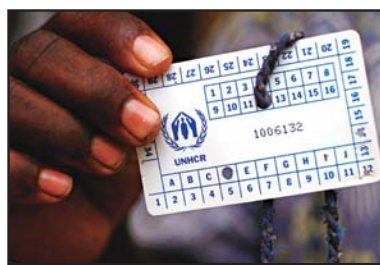
When the resettlement interviews began for the Bantus, 25,000 refugees said they were members of the tribe. More than half were lying, the U.S. State Department determined.

Some Somali refugees tried to buy their way into Bantu families. They paid as much as \$6,000, more than most refugees could make in 10 years working for relief groups in the camp.

Some threatened that their Somali relatives in the United States would harm the Bantus upon arrival if they didn't hand over their ration cards,



All refugees older than 13 heading to the United States must be fingerprinted. Amy Lint, an American technician with the International Organization for Migration, scans Somon Mohamed Somon's prints in Kakuma.



Ration cards issued by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees both identify refugees and allow them to get food, firewood and other services in the camps.

which are their main source of identification. Refugees also use the cards to obtain food.

Other disgruntled refugees formed a human chain around the town of Dadaab in northeastern Kenya and threw stones and rotten fruit at humanitarian vehicles carrying Bantus.

As part of efforts to prevent fraud, Bantus must undergo multiple interviews and identity checks. They are fingerprinted and photographed to root out impostors.

"You can't catch all of their tricks, but we've gotten better," said Tonje Oyan, a Scandinavian who is an associate resettlement officer for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. "If someone is determined to cheat, they will find a way."

Verifying a refugee's identity can be complicated, Oyan said. Many have no birth certificates, and unraveling tribal lineages can be difficult.

In addition, new security regulations in the United States require FBI and CIA screening for refugees arriving from terrorist hot spots.

The total cost to the U.S. government is about \$3,500 per refugee, including processing; assistance to settle in America; and airfare, which the refugee is expected to repay.

The maximum number of refugees allowed to travel on any flight to the United States is 35. That cap allows time for fingerprinting and processing at U.S. airports.

The extra checks have caused years-long delays for some refugees, particularly from Muslim countries in Africa and the Middle East.

The United States, which accepts

by far the largest number of refugees for resettlement, established a 2002 quota of about 70,000 after Sept. 11, 2001. But only 27,110 refugees actually made the journey that year.

"We do our best to balance post-Sept. 11 security concerns with the rights of refugees fleeing persecution," said Terry Rusch, director for the Office of Admissions for the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. "Last year, we resettled two-thirds of all refugees who went to live in another country."

Widespread fraud

It doesn't help that Kenya frequently has been the target of extremists. In the country's capital of Nairobi, terrorists blew up the U.S. Embassy in 1998 and an Israeli-owned hotel in November 2002. A month later, several refugees complained to the United Nations that al-Qaida and rebel militias were running guns and operating in the camps, including Kakuma.

The accusations were dismissed after a joint investigation by the United Nations and the United States. But while the allegations were being investigated, immigration officials stopped processing resettlement cases for more than a month, creating a backlog.

The refugee resettlement program itself became a target in 2001 when several scams were exposed in a years-long bribery and extortion scheme involving 70 people, including three U.N. workers. They steered refugees with money to syndicate members, who charged as much as \$6,000 for a new life in the United States, Canada, Australia or western Europe.

U.N. officials said they have adopted new guidelines and hired better-trained managers and more-engaged employees.

"Identity and security checks have never been better," said Makonnen Tesfaye, program officer for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees in Kenya.

Although Owanza doesn't regret turning in the man who tried to thrust his child into her family, she hopes the incident doesn't diminish their chances of starting a new life.

"There's no freedom or future for us here," she said. "Only threats."

Lives in jeopardy

At the start of this year, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees had identified about 17 million people "of concern" worldwide. It classified them in five groups:

9.7 million refugees

► People who had fled their country and could not return because of war or civil conflict or for fear of persecution based on their nationality, political opinion, race, religion or membership in a particular social group. Last year, the largest number, 2.1 million, came from Afghanistan, followed by Sudan with 606,200.

985,500 asylum seekers

► People who fled their country for another without going through a humanitarian or other relief group and then applied for sanctuary, seeking aid and legal protection. The top four destination countries for asylum seekers were United Kingdom (61,100), United States (60,700), France (59,800) and Germany (50,600).

4.4 million internally displaced persons

► People who were caught in situations similar to refugees but had stayed in their country. The largest population, 1.2 million, was in Colombia.

912,200 stateless people

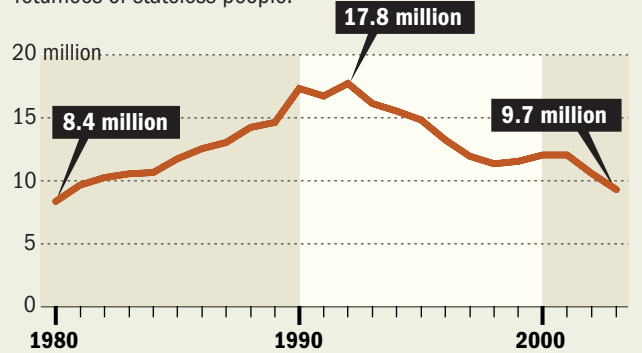
► People who had been affected by war but don't fit any of the other categories. They could total as many as 9 million worldwide.

1.1 million returnees

► Refugees who returned home but are receiving assistance, such as farm tools and seeds. The largest number, 645,900, returned to Afghanistan, followed by Angola, 133,000.

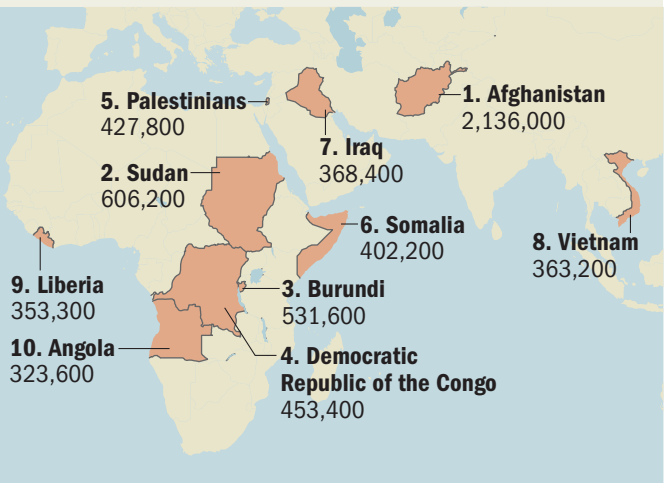
Global refugee population

The global refugee population fell by 9.1 percent to 9.7 million in 2003. Figures do not include internally displaced persons, returnees or stateless people.

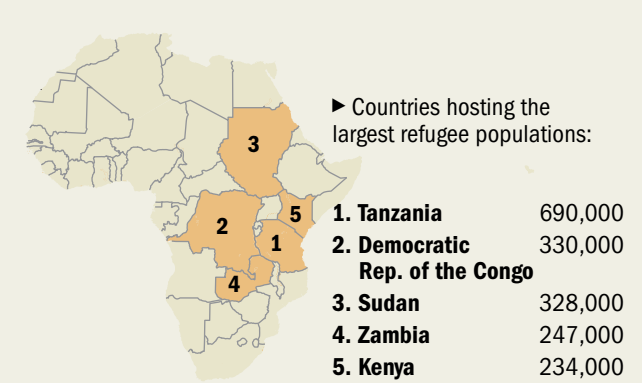


Around the world

Countries of origin for the world's 10 largest refugee groups, 2003:



Host countries in Africa



Sources: U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, Knight Ridder Tribune

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Volunteer from Fairfield County risks his life to help refugees

NAIROBI, Kenya — At age 28, Chris Hoffman has dedicated more than half his life to easing human suffering in war-ravaged regions of the world, mostly in Africa.

Helping refugees has always been dangerous work, but the Fairfield County native has seen it turn deadly during the past several years.

"There has been a rise of deliberate assaults and intimidations against aid workers," said Hoffman, who grew up in Bremen, east of Lancaster, and works for the International Organization for Migration. He fingerprints refugees, verifies their identity and schedules charter flights to the camp and arranges escorts to the United States.

Civilians always have been caught in the middle of civil wars. But until recently, humanitarian groups were accepted as neutral parties. Now they often become targets of war and face the same perils as the people they help.

On Aug. 14, for example, rebels shot and killed a colleague of Hoffman's, Resper Losuru Keem, as she took a taxi from her work site at the Kakuma refugee camp in northwestern Kenya to Lokichoggio, a small town nearby. A local Turkana and mother of four, Keem became the first International Organization for Migration worker to be killed in Kenya. The taxi driver was shot but survived.

"I was on that very same road a week earlier," Hoffman said. "Scary."

Armed security guards patrol the agency's hilltop office in the capital. Barbed wire, concrete blast walls and other barriers surround



Chris Hoffman, a relief worker in Nairobi who grew up in Bremen, Ohio, with his wife, Wakanyi Hoffman, whom he married this summer.

the compound. A hub for humanitarian aid and political action in the Horn of Africa, Nairobi hosts dozens of charitable organizations that have similarly protected offices.

Crime is so widespread in the city that most of the upscale apartment complexes have razor wire and 24-hour security. "I saw a neighbor of mine get hijacked at our gate by a group of guys with AK-47s," Hoffman said. "Now I honk my horn so security can open the door even before I hit the driveway. I don't ever want to be a sitting duck."

Since January, dozens of aid workers have been killed in Afghanistan, Iraq, Liberia and other war zones.

Assailants killed five members of Doctors Without Borders in June, prompting the Nobel Prize-winning organization to pull out of Afghanistan.

In October 2003, a dozen people were killed in a suicide bombing of the Baghdad office of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Two months earlier, a car bomb at the U.N. headquarters in Iraq exploded, killing 23 people.

Also slain have been U.N. employees registering Afghans to vote; Chinese workers rebuilding roads in northern Afghanistan; and a celebrated Italian aid worker, Annalena Tonelli, known as the "Mother Teresa of Africa," who had helped Somalis in eastern Africa for more than 30 years.

"It's a new, dangerous world," said John Walburn, a Briton who heads the migration organization's office in Kakuma. "The blue-and-white flag of the United Nations is no longer a protective emblem."

Some aid workers think the U.S. war on terrorism has incited warring parties to view humanitarian groups as political agents of the Western world.

"We have been particularly alarmed by the erosion of respect for our neutral and impartial work . . . especially for those working as volunteers, with little else to protect them except the emblem," said Juan Manuel Suarez del Toro, president of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

"The struggle against terrorist activities, necessary and legitimate as it is, must not undermine the value on which society must

be founded," he said during a conference in Geneva earlier this year.

Still, many relief workers say the payoff for helping suffering people is worth the dangers.

"I can't afford to live in fear when so many people are dying," said Christopher Macharia, 51, a driver for the International Organization for Migration in Kakuma. "There's no use worrying about what could happen," he said. "For that, I pray."

For Hoffman, ministering to the poor and sick has been a lifelong love affair. As a 14-year-old student on summer vacation, he started working with impoverished elementary students in the Kalahari Desert of Zimbabwe. He made the trip with Teen Missions International, a Christian ministry.

In 2003, he became the Kenya coordinator for the International Community for Relief of Starving and Suffering and oversaw the group's HIV/AIDS programs. He started working toward a master's degree in African-American studies from the Keller Graduate School of Management and moved on to the International Organization for Migration last May. He will receive his master's in April.

This summer, he married his next-door neighbor, Wakanyi Hoffman, a 24-year-old reporter for the *Daily Nation*. The couple will move to New York in January for a year so she can attend Columbia University. After that, they will return to Nairobi.

"Africa is a funny thing," Chris Hoffman said. "Once it's in your blood, you can't get it out. I live each day just hoping I make a little bit of a difference."

ESCAPING DEATH'S SHADOW

Negotiating the slums]



[CHAPTER 3



Markabo Aden Warsame, 24, rocks her 5-month-old nephew, Abdisamad Jaylani Dahir, to sleep on a bed that doubles as a couch in the Dahir apartment.

A lesser evil?

Despite crime, chaos and cholera, slums can be better than the alternative



NAIROBI, Kenya — Bedtime at Jaylani Aden Dahir's two-room apartment in one of the many slums circling the Kenyan capital can be frustrating. Two babies share a crib. Three older children sleep on a lumpy mattress on the floor, their sweaty bodies curled atop one another.

The eldest daughter squeezes between Dahir, 25, and his wife, Ader Aden Warsame, 29, on a twin bed pushed against the wall so only one person faces the inevitable fall during the night.



ABOVE: The children gather for lunch in the Dahir family apartment. From left are Nasra Jaylani Aden, 9; Yahya Jaylani Aden, 7; Hamdi Jaylani Aden, 5; and Abdirahman Jaylani Aden, 4.

Five live-in relatives pile onto the two other twin beds, arms and legs hanging over three sides.

Unexpected family and guests sleep in the hallway.

"It's a tight fit, and even then, someone *always* ends up on the floor," Warsame says in Somali, through an interpreter.

Still, Dahir, who hopes to join his father in Columbus someday, is grateful for what he has in this ghetto known as Eastleigh. While he has two rooms, many of his neighbors live with 13 people in one room — mud-and-stick shacks packed together eave to eave. Children play in the slop on narrow, rutted alleys running with sewage. Chickens peck rotten tomatoes in the plentiful rubbish heaps.

Nearly two-thirds of the city's 2.5 million residents crowd into settlements such as Eastleigh and Kibera, Nairobi's largest slum, with 500,000 to 750,000 people. And the gulf between rich and poor is expected to widen as thousands of penniless refugees and rural Kenyans leave the country's northern desert looking for opportunity.

Some refugees never go to camps, because they fear they'll run into former oppressors. Others grow weary of waiting for resettlement, which can take years, and leave the camps for the city.

"Most will only find misery, for Nairobi's slums are a recipe for disaster," Dahir says.

Comparable to the *favelas* of Brazil or the cardboard-and-plywood shantytowns of India, Nairobi's slums are among the most dangerous, dense, insecure and unsanitary in the world, according to Pamoja Trust, a worldwide housing-advocacy group, which



has an office in Nairobi.

"The slums are a place people should be running from, not to," said Paul Ouma, project manager of GOAL Kenya, which works with refugees and street children.

Cholera, dysentery, pneumonia and typhoid spread rapidly through the communities, which have no toilets or sanitary drainage systems. One-fifth of all children die by age 5. And AIDS-related illnesses kill hundreds of adults each day, leaving frightened children to fend for themselves as

street urchins.

In the past year, 7-year-old Sufia Ali Khalid lost everyone in her family to AIDS.

Her mother died first; then her 12-year-old brother; and finally, her father, whose body Sufia clung to in a cold, dark tin shack on the outskirts of Nairobi. The skinny, sallow-eyed youngster, who is HIV positive, faces the same fate. Treated as an outcast, Sufia struggles with confusion, fear and grief.

The lucky children end up in orphanages such as the Good Samaritan Children's Home

in Mathare, one of Nairobi's most dangerous slums. They receive food, a comfortable bed and hope that a family will adopt and love them.

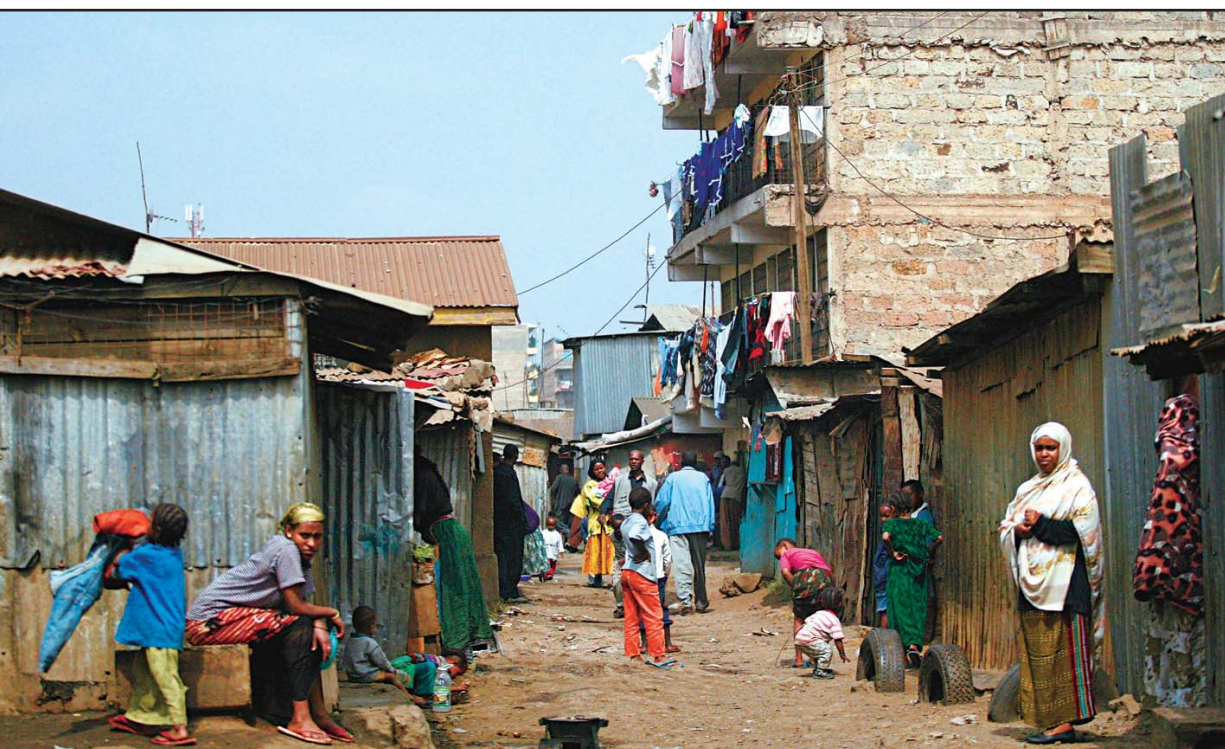
Sufia has been taken in by a family of strangers in the Kariobangi slum. She still begs on the streets, where relief workers found her. Once she is declared a refugee by U.N. workers, she can be moved into a foster home in the Dadaab or Kakuma camp.

Little work, less money

Urban services, such as they are in the slums, consist of dirt roads, drainage ditches, community water faucets and latrines. Women spend much of their time on tedious

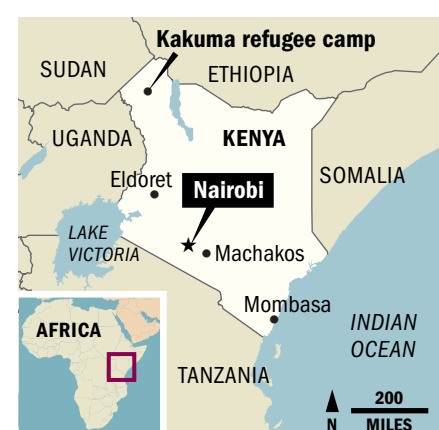
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“No matter how hard I try, I can’t find work,” says Jamal Kadar Walbo, 34, who moved to Kariobangi in 2000 after being tortured repeatedly in his native Ethiopia. “Sometimes my wife makes a little money washing clothes. She is looking for a job as a maid.”



LEFT: Even when he finds an odd job, Walbo says, Kenyan police take everything he earns.

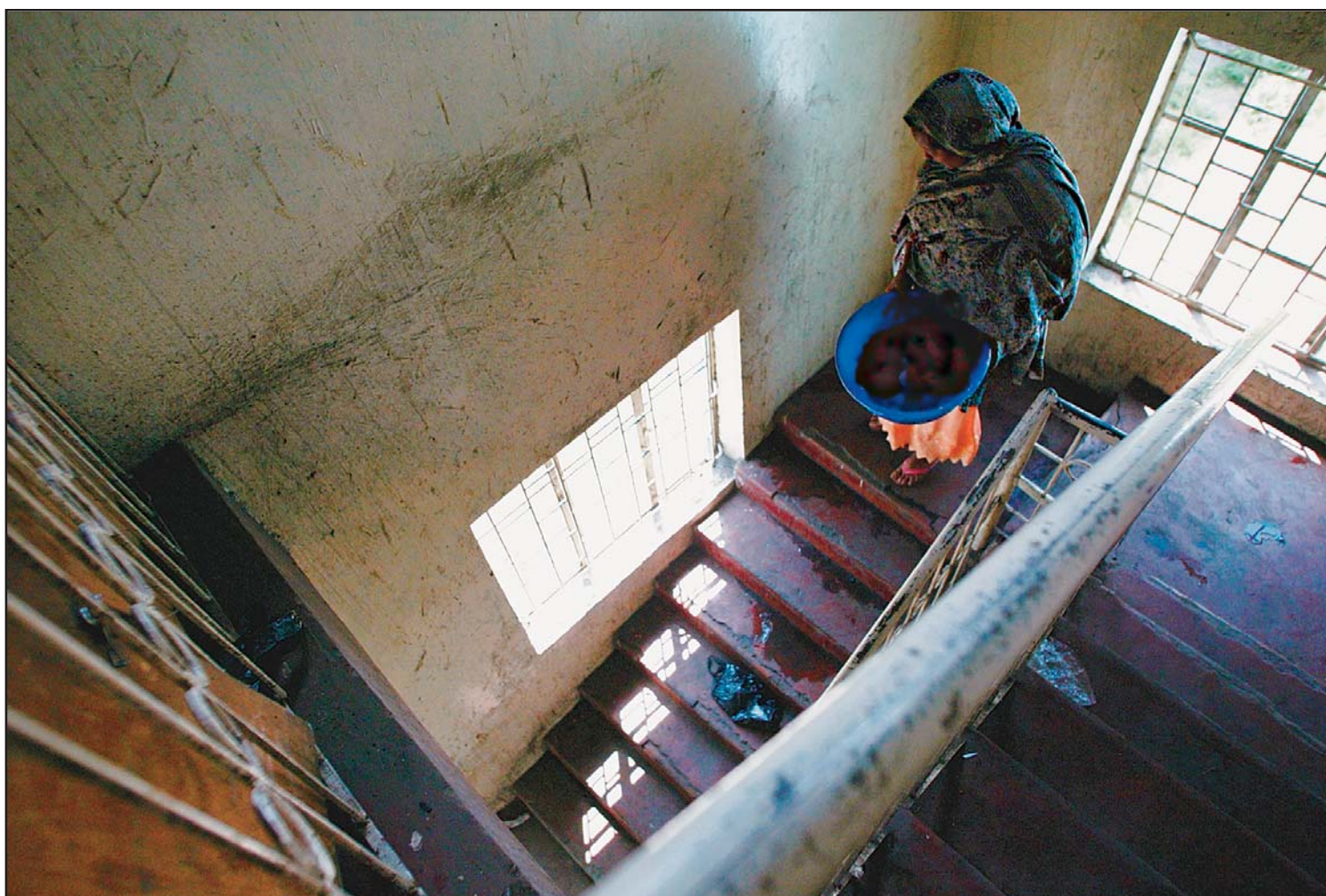
ABOVE: More than 1.6 million people live in Nairobi slums such as this one called Kariobangi, where many refugees from Ethiopia live.



Nairobi

- Nairobi originated in 1899 as a supply station along a railroad expansion into the Kenya interior. It became the capital of British East Africa in 1907 and quickly filled with Europeans.
- The city is the symbolic capital of eastern Africa, and it is a regional center for business, finance and transportation.
- About two-thirds of Nairobi’s 2.5 million people live in slums. One in five children living in the city’s slums dies by age five.

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH



Ader Aden Warsame, 29, takes freshly washed clothes down the steps of her Eastleigh apartment building.

chores — fetching water, preparing bean-and-goat stews using solar-powered ovens and washing clothes by hand.

Early each morning, men trek to downtown Nairobi and the market-lined streets in the slums looking for work from butchers, dry cleaners or grocers and in small shops called *dukas*, which sell such things as candy, head scarves, plastic storage containers and religious icons.

Some land jobs as security guards for humanitarian groups. Others become watchmen for rich foreigners. Many come home dejected, their heads hanging. “No matter how hard I try, I can’t find work,” says Jamal Kadar Walbo, 34, who moved to Kariobangi in 2000 after being tortured repeatedly in his native Ethiopia. “Sometimes my wife makes a little money washing clothes. She is looking for a job as a maid.”

Money troubles sometimes lead to violent landlord-tenant disagreements. A skirmish over rents in Kibera in December 2001 left 10 people dead and 100 injured. Several thousand homes were destroyed and more than 3,000 people displaced.

Weapons are easy to come by in the slums. Both residents and relief workers say rebels from Chad, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan are smuggling guns into the communities. It’s common to see men on the streets carrying AK-47 and Kalashnikov rifles, particularly after sundown.

Living in the slums is bad for anyone who is poor, but it’s worse for refugees. Kenyan authorities restrict their right to work; grant little or no public assistance; and require documentation that they are refugees, which expires unless they go to the camps.

Dahir knows these and other challenges well. He was 12 in 1991 when his family fled Somalia’s capital city, Mogadishu.

Shortly after the start of the civil war, militiamen with AK-47s came to Dahir’s street. They stole food, clothing and everything else of value. When a neighbor refused to obey orders, the rebels shot him dead.

After several days of walking in the brutal heat, its food and water gone, Dahir’s family reached Kismayo, where his father’s older brother and family lived.

His dad, Aden Dahir Hassan, now 50, started a small business selling corn, oil and sugar. Hassan remarried in 1994 after his first wife, Dahir’s mother, died from a leg wound.

Two years later, the family joined the exodus to Kenya. They arrived in Eastleigh in 1997 and moved into a 10-by-10-foot room with dirt-smear ocher walls, a crude



In Eastleigh, a Nairobi slum, Warsame and others rely on clotheslines to dry their laundry.

wooden trunk and a broken box spring.

After being separated from her relatives during the war, Dahir’s older sister, Nasria Aden Dahir, found them in 1999, through mutual friends. She petitioned the U.S. State Department to allow them to join her in Virginia.

The U.S. government approved the application for Hassan and his new wife, Faduma Abdalla Ali, 35. But authorities denied the request for Jaylani Dahir and his brother, Aweis Aden Dahir.

“We were left behind because resettlement officers had our ages wrong,” Jaylani said. “They told us we were too tall to only be teenagers.”

Parents are supposed to be allowed to bring their children to a new country, as long as the kids are unmarried and younger than 21.

“It was hard for us, but that is the way it is,” said Aweis, who said he is 18.

After their father left, the brothers worked on and off, selling hot tea and writing receipts at the front desk of a slum hotel. They made 3,000 Kenyan shillings a month, roughly \$37. About \$31 went toward rent, leaving them with \$6.

Even more than the money, they miss their father’s guidance.

“He gave good advice,” Jaylani said. “If he

stayed, we would have finished school.”

Aweis wanted to go to law school. Jaylani Dahir fantasized about becoming a doctor, engineer or pilot.

Aweis still works in a hotel. Jaylani sells clothing in a Somali-owned mall, earning \$87 a month.

Now Jaylani has two new hopes, each very different: return to Somalia or go to America.

“They’re both paradises,” he said. “Somalia has my heart, America my head.”

Lives in limbo

Hassan, who now lives in Blacklick, in eastern Franklin County, with his second wife and their three young boys, doesn’t want his older sons returning to their homeland.

“It’s a no man’s land, a lawless jungle,” he said.

He fears that if they go back, they will join a warlord.

“The rebels can give them the money, power and sense of family I no longer can,” Hassan said, shaking his head, his voice cracking. “I hate that they think I have forgotten and abandoned them. I feel so hopeless.”

Jaylani Dahir would gladly pack up his family and head to Columbus. “There’s nothing keeping us in Kenya except bad luck,” he says.

For now, Jaylani Dahir waits with his wife

and their children — Nasra, 9; Yahya, 7; Hamdi, 5; Abdurahman, 4; Abdullahi, 1, and Abdisamad, 5 months.

Like all Somalis, their children have three names: their given name, their father’s first name and their grandfather’s first name. For example, Nasra’s full name is Nasra Jaylani Aden. Like her mother, she will not change her name at marriage.

For now, though, Nasra is consumed with her favorite TV show, *Powerpuff Girls*, which she watches on the 13-inch television in her parents’ apartment.

“They’re amazing,” she says in perfect English.

Jaylani and his wife insist that the children learn English, Somali and Swahili.

“They’re not going to miss out on opportunities we never had. They deserve better than this,” Warsame says, hanging dripping laundry on a clothesline.

Nasra wants to become a doctor. “I could help the sick and support my family,” she says.

The younger children are content to play soccer and skip rope. They pause to sit on the floor around a large platter, scooping spaghetti with their hands.

“Mmm, mmm,” Hamdi says, spitting noodles from her bulging cheeks. Once they’re done eating, it’s Nasra’s job to sweep the floor with a handful of loose bristles.

Outside, nose-tickling smoke rises and grease splatters as neighbors cook on their *jikos*. The metal stoves have grill grates formed from cooking-oil drums.

It’s noon, and Somalis up and down the street boil pots of spicy rice, while Ethiopians bake *chapati*, a flatbread, and Kenyans simmer pans of *ugali*, a cornmeal mush. Despite the aromas of cooking, the alley stinks of urine.

Gray-haired men sit in the rusted shell of an old bus, talking and chewing *miraa* — a mild hallucinogenic mixed with gum.

Women in brightly colored scarves sell camel’s milk from big white jugs. Sitting on a boulder, Ramadani Wambaka, a 29-year-old Kenyan, charges 10 shillings (12 cents) to wash tennis shoes with a coarse, soapy brush. Skilled with a machete, Peter Ngingi, 25, also a Kenyan, slices papayas, which he sells by the baggie.

Others hawk apples, bananas and even baseball caps from wheelbarrows.

A lanky boy trips as he carries more than a dozen empty water bottles. A young girl, who should be in school, cooks corn and yams on a Weber-like grill on a busy corner.

Half a dozen dirt-covered men pick through a trash heap, looking for treasures to salvage. Newly hatched ducklings swim in a puddle of muddy water from a leaky faucet. Children play with dirt-filled plastic bottles attached to strings, swinging them above their heads.

As difficult as the conditions are, Jaylani Dahir doesn’t want to lose his home.

Earlier this year, the Kenyan government decided to evict 330,000 people from two of the city’s 168 tenement communities. Officials halted the bulldozers after protests from the United Nations and the Vatican, but residents and relief workers worry that they will roll again — and not just in the two slums.

“Life is tough, but it would be worse living on the streets,” Dahir says. “At least, we’re comfortable while we wait to go to Ohio.”

ESCAPING DEATH'S SHADOW

Coming to America]



[CHAPTER 4

Endless wait

With a wave of refugees on the way, reunions can't come soon enough for anxious relatives



After living in Pittsburgh for 11 months, Amina Said Mohamed now resides on the Far West Side with her six children, including daughter Ayan Osman, 4. Mohamed has lived apart from her husband for 3½ years.

Life without her husband is like food without salt — “tasteless,” Amina Said Mohamed says.

The mother of six is one of more than 600 refugees in central Ohio who have applied during the past year to be reunited with nearly 4,000 relatives stuck overseas in camps, shantytowns and war-ravaged countries.

An easing of red tape, post-Sept. 11 security delays and travel restrictions has led to a surge of refugees who soon will be joining loved ones in Columbus and other resettlement hot spots across the country.

It also has led to growing concern about the community's ability to absorb them.

“The cultural, educational, health-care and employment barriers for these new Americans are enormous,” Mayor Michael B. Coleman said recently.

But he also said, “In Columbus, we embrace and extend our hands to everyone.”

For Mohamed, an easing of the backlog would mean the end of a 3½-year separation from her husband, Afi Mohamed Abdi, 41, who shares a room



Afi Mohamed Abdi

with three other men 7,832 miles away in a slum on the fringes of Nairobi, Kenya.

“Life is better since we left Africa, but it's still not complete,” said Mohamed, 43, of the Far West Side.

The family-reunification program accounts for nearly two-thirds of all permanent immigration to the United States each year. Other immigrants are brought by employers for a specific job, win an annual lottery in which the U.S. government draws the names of 50,000 people from countries with low immigration rates, or are refugees and asylum seekers fleeing persecution.

Somalia and other African countries are the homes for 95 percent of the 577 refugees approved to join relatives in Columbus this year, and for nearly all of the 3,944 people whose applications are wending through the process, said Angela Plummer, director of Community Refugee & Immigration Services, a nonprofit Columbus group.

Columbus already has the second-largest population of Somali refugees in the United States, ranked only behind Minneapolis. Many think it could surpass that city as immigration officials work through application backlogs that date back 10 years.

The State Department also has proposed adding Ethiopians and Eritreans to the list of those eligible for priority resettlement when joining family members. That could have a significant effect on Columbus, Plummer said.

“Both of those communities have really taken off. Ethiopians and Eritreans are moving (to Columbus) from as far as California because of the city's reputation of being warm and welcoming,” she said.

Since 1990, more than 45,000 people from other countries have arrived in Franklin County in varying degrees of need.

Nearly 1,120 of the Columbus Public Schools' 62,200 students in the past academic year were Somali. About 25 percent of them spent the school year at one of the district's three welcome centers, taking English-as-a-second-language classes.

“It will take most of these students seven to 10 years before they reach the same competency as students raised here,” said Ken Woodard, who supervises the language program. “That's a huge gap.”

The district spent nearly \$10 million on introductory English classes last year.

The county commissioners have asked resettlement groups and Community Research Partners, a nonprofit agency set up in 2000 to evaluate human services in the county, to determine the number of refugees in central Ohio, their nationalities and the cost to help them.

For example, the federal government will spend more than \$1.2 million this year — a 23



Five of Amina Said Mohamed's six children mill around her as she sits outside their Far West Side home. From left: Fatuma Hassan, 15; Halima Osman, 5; Ayan Osman, 4, (in a white T-shirt); Mohamed Mohamed, 3; and Hassan Hassan, 13. Missing is Abdi Hassan, 14.



Ayan, 4, reads a Dr. Seuss book as Fatuma, 15, puts on Mohamed's shoes. Their mother has been separated from her husband, who lives 7,832 miles away in a slum on the fringes of Nairobi, Kenya.

percent increase from last year — helping Somali and other refugees resettle in Franklin County by covering such things as English lessons, health screenings and job training.

“As much as we'd like to help everyone, there's a limit to what we can handle,” Commissioner Arlene Shoemaker said. “What we have to do is find out what that limit is.”

Different needs

Jewish Family Services is overseeing the resettlement of 200 Somali Bantus. By Oct. 26, the group will have helped 136 Bantus move into apartments, open bank accounts, apply for food stamps and sign up for English classes and job training. It also has assisted 45 other refugees who have joined family members here and is to help another five families before the year's end.

“The difference between the groups is that the Somali Bantus are strangers coming to a strange land, knowing no one and nothing,” said Beth Gerber, associate director of the resettlement agency. “The refugees joining family aren't as isolated and have people they know, trust and who can help them.”

To bring a family member to the United States, a refugee must promise to support that person and must have an income of at least

125 percent of the federal poverty level, which is \$18,850 a year for a family of four.

This year, Jewish Family Services received \$75,000 from the federal government for the Bantus and \$175,000 from the county. The group also receives \$400 in federal funds for each refugee to pay for clothing, food, furniture and rent for the first 30 days in Columbus.

“Without the county grant, we couldn't do it,” Gerber said. “With it, it's still difficult.” Shoemaker and others are troubled by the large number of refugees who move to Franklin County after being resettled in another state, because the money to help them is even more limited.

“We can't let them end up trading one kind of poverty for another,” County Commissioner Mary Jo Kilroy said.

Some people complain that refugees are a drain on the economy, receive undeserved breaks from the government and take jobs from Americans. But advocates for refugees say they pay taxes; fill health-care, hospitality and other low-paying jobs that Americans don't want; and expand the demand for goods and services.

While the number of refugees in this country may seem large, they have represented a

larger portion of the population in the past. In 1910, the peak year, 14.7 percent of U.S. residents were foreign-born, compared with nearly 12 percent today.

Ohio ranks 38th in foreign-born residents, with 3.3 percent of the population; and Columbus is 49th among U.S. cities, with 8.1 percent, according to 2003 census reports.

Forced separation

Mohamed and her husband, Abdi, grew up in the same town just outside Mogadishu, Somalia. They were friends but lost track of each other after rebels ousted the nation's dictator, Siad Barre, in 1991.

The rebels killed Mohamed's husband, mother and father. Mohamed, who was pregnant, and her two children, fled to a refugee camp near Mombasa in Kenya. Abdi went to the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, because he heard that life was dangerous and hardscabble in the camps.

Their paths didn't cross again until 2000. By that time, Mohamed had given birth to two more children, had lost another husband and had moved to Kakuma, another refugee camp in Kenya. Militiamen killed her second husband as he was returning to Kakuma after a 15-day scouting trip to determine whether Somalia was safe enough to move back.

At the end of 1999, aid workers moved Mohamed, who was pregnant by her late husband, and her four children to Nairobi to prepare them for the United States. What she thought would be days turned to months. She met up with Abdi and married him in December 2000.

Resettlement workers told the couple that adding Abdi to the family might mean years of delays. Mohamed and Abdi decided that she and the children should go to America without him, but she was pregnant again, with his child, and couldn't leave until the baby was born.

Two months and 15 days after the birth of her sixth child, she landed in New York City on April 5, 2001.

Mohamed and the children moved to Pittsburgh, where they lived for 11 months. But when doctors diagnosed cancer in her oldest daughter, Mohamed moved to Columbus so the child could be treated at Children's Hospital. The family was homeless when Lutheran Social Services came to its aid.

“Those were the blackest days of my life,” said Abdi, sitting on a twin bed in his sparsely furnished room in Eastleigh, a Nairobi slum. “My hair went gray from worry.”

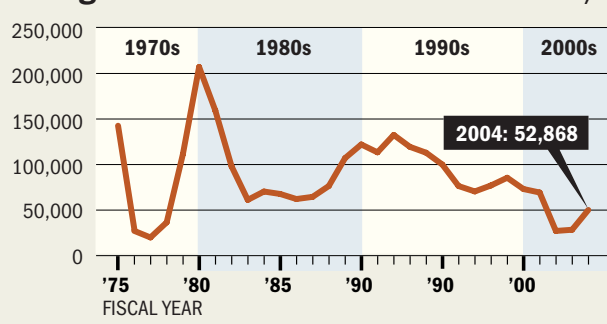
He has interviewed with resettlement workers but still awaits a medical checkup and security screening.

“We were told we'd be together again in 120 days. That was seven days ago,” he said in late August. “I love and miss Amina and the children so much. They are my life.”

Two months later, he still is waiting. Meanwhile, Mohamed struggles to care for the children, take nursing classes at Columbus State Community College and volunteer 20 hours a week at the welfare office, which she is required to do in lieu of working.

“I'm here legally,” she said, raising her fist in the air for emphasis. “I will never give up on bringing my husband here — even if it takes me the rest of my life.”

Refugees admitted to the United States, 1975-2004



Admissions by world region FY 2004

Africa	29,125
Europe, Central Asia	9,254
Eastern Asia	8,079
Caribbean, Latin America	3,556
Near East, South Asia	2,854
TOTAL	52,868

Source: U.S. State Department

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

ESCAPING DEATH'S SHADOW

[*The flight of the Bantus*]

Hearts divided, couple dreams of reuniting

ReBELS killed her father and two brothers in Somalia. They kidnapped her and forced her to live as their housekeeper for seven years. Raped by her abductors, she gave birth to twins — a boy and a girl.

Still, Ud Sofe Abdulle, 35, is lucky. She escaped Somalia and made her way to Columbus. She wants nothing more than to forget the horrors she left behind. But she can't.

Her husband remains stuck in Kenya. "I just want to think about the future," Abdulle said. "But how can I when part of my heart and soul is still in Africa?"

Like hundreds of thousands of refugees and immigrants in the United States, Abdulle does everything she can to support her husband, stranded an ocean away in Eastleigh, a Nairobi slum.

She calls at least four times a month to update him on the lives of the children. She writes him for financial and other advice. And she clips coupons and scrimps so she can send him \$100 a month for food, rent and other essentials.

Somali refugees in the United States, Canada and elsewhere send an estimated \$84 million a year to poor relatives in refugee camps, slums and war-ravaged villages throughout eastern Africa, according to a 2002 U.N. report.

But what Abdulle and her 41-year-old husband, Omar Hassan Mudey, want most is to be reunited.

"I can't stand to be separated from my wife and children for much longer," Mudey said, sitting on a plastic barrel in a courtyard in Eastleigh, where he was videotaping a friend's wedding for a little extra money. "As it is, I can barely eat, sleep or think."

The video camera is the sole source of income for Mudey, who has three changes of clothing and only a bed in his apartment.

"I'm lonely. I'm depressed. I'm going crazy," he said, on the verge of tears. "If it is not possible for me to go to the U.S., then they have to come back here."

Years of uncertainty

Abdulle and Mudey were living on the outskirts of Mogadishu in 1991 when 40 rebels in military fatigues stormed their house and accused Abdulle's father of being a confidante of ousted dictator Siad Barre. They shot her father and two brothers, beat her mother and abducted Abdulle.

"I tried to help," Mudey said in Somali, through an interpreter. "But they threatened to kill me and her."

Mudey and the couple's four children walked for 22 days until they reached the Kenyan border, where they were received by U.N. workers. He didn't know his wife was alive until 1996, when a friend told him that he had heard she was being held captive in Kismayo, a town south of Mogadishu, and had given birth to twins four years earlier.

"I felt sad for her, having children out of rape. I wanted to kill them, but there was nothing I could do," Mudey said about her abductors.

Abdulle prefers not to talk about those days.

"I survived by believing in God and giving thanks that I was still alive," she said.

Abdulle planned her escape with help from an old family friend. She and the twins fled Kismayo one night and were spirited away to a refugee camp in Somalia. Abdulle sent the children — first the daughter, then the son — to her husband in Eastleigh.

Afraid that Abdulle's captors would find her, relatives paid her fare for illegal passage to the United States in January 1999. She landed in New York City and then moved to Alexandria, Va., where she applied for asylum. She came to Columbus a month later, after receiving a work permit, and she now lives on the North Side.

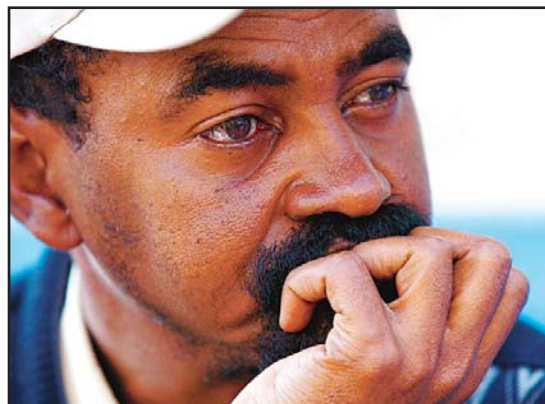
Mudey was ecstatic for his wife but feared she would forget him.

"It was seven years since we last saw one another, and it would still be several months before Ud would track me down by phone," he said.

Abdulle worked two jobs, icing cookies and cleaning office buildings, to save money to bring her family to Ohio. She later switched to assembling hospital supplies.

In November 1999, she petitioned Church World Service in Nairobi to resettle her family in Columbus through the U.S. refugee program. Five months later, the group approved her children but denied her husband.

The problem: Mudey didn't divorce his first wife, Faduma Jama Abdulle, until a year after marrying Ud Sofe Abdulle. According to



"I can't stand to be separated from my wife and children for much longer," Omar Hassan Mudey said, sitting on a plastic barrel in a courtyard in Eastleigh, where he was videotaping a friend's wedding for a little extra money. "As it is, I can barely eat, sleep or think. ...I'm lonely. I'm depressed. I'm going crazy. If it is not possible for me to go to the U.S., then they have to come back here."



ABOVE: Evans Odeny Mbaya, 35, a Kenyan, has been a tailor for 24 years. The "scratch cards" advertised on the door of his Eastleigh shop are phone cards that many people use so they can share cell phones.

LEFT: Ramadani Wambaka, a Kenyan, washes shoes 11 hours a day in Eastleigh, charging 10 shillings a pair, which is about 12 cents.

Islamic law, a man is allowed as many as four wives.

Yet immigration officials decided not to recognize the marriage with Ud Abdulle, since it wouldn't be valid here.

"I don't understand," Mudey said. "I did the right thing. I got a divorce."

Years of red tape

Abdulle is equally baffled. "Why can't the United States accept that the cultures are different?" she asked. "It shouldn't matter anyway, because his first wife has died."

Despite their disappointment, they were glad that five of the seven children — now

ages 12 to 20 — were going to Columbus. They arrived on July 17, 2001. One son and a stepdaughter live with relatives in Somalia.

"It was a long time in coming — so long my youngest daughter didn't even recognize me," Abdulle said.

The couple spent the next two years trying to convince the U.S. government they were married. Then, in July 2003, Abdulle borrowed \$2,000 from friends and flew to Nairobi to remarry her husband.

"Those two months that she was here were the happiest of my life," Mudey said. "We had photos taken. I filmed her with my video camera. It was like we were newly married again."

When she returned to Columbus, Abdulle discovered she was pregnant.

"I got sick one day and went to the hospital," she said. "What a surprise."

Hamza Omar Hassan was born at 10:22 a.m. on March 31.

"I long to hold him," Mudey said.

In August, the couple filed an appeal with the immigration office in Lincoln, Neb. Officials there told her that she could try to sponsor Mudey after she obtains a green card. Abdulle applied for one in 2002, but because of caps, backlogs and processing delays, it could take as long as 10 years. Until then, she pays \$175 a year for a work permit.

"If I have to wait that long, it is better for me to go back to Kenya," she said.

Hopeful that the process will move more quickly, Abdulle gave her fingerprints on Sept. 17 for the first of two background checks.

For now, she lives as a single parent — juggling work, school and child care — while her husband sinks deeper into depression.

"The last thing I was told by immigration was, 'You'll never see America, so there is no use,'" Mudey said. "I have no reason to live without my family."



Encarnacion Pyle



Alysia Olglesby

Project contributors

Encarnacion Pyle and Alysia Olglesby spent 17 days in Africa, visiting a refugee camp in northwestern Kenya and slums in Nairobi, to tell the story of Somali Bantus and others who are seeking refuge in the United States, many in Columbus. The stories include scenes they witnessed and some described to them. The project was made possible in part by a World Affairs Journalism Fellowship. The International Center for Journalists

selected 10 journalists nationwide this year, including Pyle, to report on international stories connected to their communities.

Pyle has been a *Dispatch* reporter since 2000. She writes about social-service issues. Olglesby has been a *Dispatch* photographer since 1999. She now is a photo editor for the paper.

Also contributing to the project were Assistant Managing Editor Kirk Arnott,

Graphic Artist Tom Baker, Photo Imager Ted Kibble, City Editor Carol Ann Lease, Assistant City Editor Rob Messinger, Managing Editor/News Alan D. Miller, Art Director Scott Minister, Copy Editor Colleen Pauley, Page Designer Molly Sedlacko and Infographics Editor Nancy Wygle.

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For more photographs from Africa, visit www.dispatch.com