



Nashville's refugee population grows in size, diversity

By Chris Echegaray and Colby Sledge • THE TENNESSEAN • February 3, 2009
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They fled the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, Iran's ayatollah, the genocides in Africa, the wars in Iraq.

The U.S. government settled them in Nashville — small enough for newcomers to navigate but big enough to attend to their needs. The city's refugee service centers stepped in with English and citizenship classes and helped them find jobs. The Metro school system guided their children to the International Newcomer Academy to learn simple aspects of American life, such as standing in line and using modern bathrooms.

And now they're coming from new places. The State Department hasn't said how many, but some of the 60,000 Bhutanese being admitted to the U.S. over religious tensions will land in Nashville. The same issue in Myanmar, formerly Burma, is bringing Burmese people here.

The latest State Department figures show Nashville ranks 28th in the nation for refugee resettlement, with nearly 3,100 placed here since 2002 — about 1 percent of the national total. Newcomers are becoming so diverse that the former Somali Community Center was recently renamed the Center for Refugees and Immigrants of Tennessee. Its development director, Carter Moody, is busy seeking grants to assist an influx arriving at a difficult time to help them.

"Over time, Nashville and several other heartland cities — Denver, Iowa City, Minneapolis — have gained more mature social services that were on par with the East and West Coast," Moody said. "The affordable **housing market** was a factor attracting them, and manufacturing jobs have made Middle Tennessee a portal."

The influx gave Nashville the largest Kurdish community in the nation, with at least 10,000, as those resettled from Iraq brought over relatives. Somalis and Sudanese are the next-largest group, with about 3,500 settled here, by conservative estimates.

Somalia was on the cusp of civil war when Mohamed Abdikarim was whisked into Kenya by his parents. They had a short stay in a refugee camp and were able to make it on their own in Nairobi.

Abdikarim had little elementary schooling, spending the bulk of his days with his parents. They applied for asylum — anywhere offering better opportunities would do. His arrival in the U.S. spared him the machete attacks and the echo of AK-47s that claimed his tribesmen in Somalia.

Still, the culture shock was a hurdle for his close-knit family. Eleven-year-old Mohamed had to assimilate and help his family adjust.

"First, it was the language, American society and everything that comes with it," he said. "You have to adapt. You realize it's harder for the parents."

At the Center for Refugees and Immigrants of Tennessee, Abdikarim played Scrabble with other Somalis to learn English. Today, he is studying medical science at Tennessee State University and he volunteers at the center, guiding refugees to their classes and helping them fill out job applications.

"I love Nashville," said Abdikarim, 21. "I love it here, man."

"I like to help my community. You learn a lot about yourself by helping others."

Transition can be hard

Before refugees arrive in Music City, resettlement agencies prepare an apartment and furnish it with donations and anything else the families may need, from pots and pans to the living room sofa.

The agencies receive little federal money to do that — as little as \$900 per person, said Lavinia Limon, president of the Washington-based U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, a resettlement agency.

"As you can imagine, that is a pitiful sum," Limon said. "In 1975, we were given \$500 per person."

The agencies can apply for additional matching federal grant funds for about 25 percent of the nation's refugees, who also can receive cash assistance for about a year after their arrival. Refugees are eligible for food stamps, although many agencies try to find them jobs within the first four months after their arrival.

"We certainly try to work with them to find jobs that are appropriate, but there also is a real focus on achieving self-sufficiency as soon as possible," said Kellye Branson, director of refugee services at Catholic Charities of Tennessee.

Many refugees with advanced degrees from their home countries end up taking entry-level jobs like housekeeping and dishwashing, Branson said. Moody said some are working two days a week for as little as \$7 an hour because of the recession.

The rapid shift from a refugee camp — where some may have spent their entire lives — to American culture can be difficult. Many have never handled currency, searched for a job or enrolled their children in school.

A recent influx of Burundi refugees fleeing from tribal fighting led Belmont University business professor John Gonas and his students to develop a series of DVDs explaining everyday actions like opening a bank account.

"They come to this country, they're given 90 days of funding and then they're expected to be able to pay their own rent and utilities," Gonas said. "Getting them to that place where they can budget whatever paycheck they have is a big deal."

Burma to Nashville

When Roger Kung decided it was time to leave Burma's oppression, he wasn't going to gamble by taking a small boat into the ocean — the way thousands of Burmese leave and perish trying to reach Thailand, Malaysia and India.

Kung, a Christian, said the military government persecuted him for his beliefs in the Buddhist nation.

"I remember being a youth leader at a conference and soldiers came by," Kung said. "They made it hard for us and sometimes they did bad things, like hit us. I decided to leave."

He volunteered to do English interpreting for a group of Burmese visiting Malaysia in 2003 and slipped away. He sought political asylum and was told he would go to the U.S. or Australia. He didn't have a choice, and he didn't care as long as he didn't return to Burma, now known as Myanmar.

He finally arrived in Nashville in 2006, immediately sent for his wife and got a job with a cabinet company.

Now, Kung, 30, volunteers to translate for other newcomers. He and his wife, Ring Tey, had their first son, John, in January 2008.



Ring Tey, an immigrant from Myanmar (formerly Burma), gets ready to feed her baby, John Kung, at their apartment in Nashville. Tey and husband Roger Kung fled religious persecution in their former country. JOHN PARTIPILO / THE TENNESSEAN

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