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Nashville may get new wave of refugees

U.S. makes region one of top sites for resettlement

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By the time the notice arrived, Sadia Yalahow and her family had been living in a state of limbo for nearly nine years.

In 1991, the family fled civil war in Somalia for a refugee community in Egypt. Once there, they found that the languid pace of international refugee resettlement and Egyptian law left them barred from work and forced to subsist on what relatives abroad could spare.

Then, a U.S. government resettlement notice arrived with surprising news: Nashville.

"We knew New York. But we were like 'Nashville? What's that?' " said Yalahow, now 23 and a student at Tennessee State University.

It's a question Yalahow asked in 2000 to which many refugees today know the answer.

From modest beginnings in the 1960s, Nashville has grown into a top U.S. resettlement site for refugees. It's the 33rd-most-frequent location out of about 200 cities measured in a study by the independent Brookings Institution.

Now, as both conflict and international attention to its human victims spread on the African continent and into new corners of Asia, Nashville's resettlement agencies are preparing to work with new refugees from Burma, Nepal and Iraq. If they arrive, Nashville's newest refugees will find a community that has itself been shaped by refugees.

Thousands resettle here

"Immigrants and certainly refugees have been redirected to a new geography," said Audrey Singer, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Brookings Institution. Singer is co-author of a 2006 study that examined refugee resettlement patterns in the United States.

During the 1990s, the U.S. State Department and nonprofit resettlement agencies noted that some of the steadiest job growth, larger stocks of affordable housing and immigrants speaking a variety of languages could be found in midsize and Southern cities. The combination left these areas equipped to deal with the language and other needs of refugees, Singer said.

Since 1997, the U.S. State Department and its 10 agency partners have officially resettled 10,167 refugees in Tennessee, according to the government agency's data. But, because refugees are free

to move as they see fit, it is impossible to know the precise number living in Tennessee.

The State Department says it plans to admit up to 70,000 refugees this year. And refugee resettlement agencies working in Nashville have been asked to prepare to resettle a small number.

Nashville already is home to an estimated 3,000 Somalis, 4,000 Sudanese and 5,000 to 7,000 Kurds.

A trip along some of south Nashville's major streets reveals stores that sell African garments, and Southeast Asian beauty products, as well as grocery stores where indoor and outdoor signs are written in Arabic. Nashville is also home to four mosques.

In the area of southeast Nashville some call "Little Kurdistan," it's not uncommon for people to speak Kurdish, for women to wear traditional Kurdish garments and for 3,000 people to attend a single Kurd's funeral.

"When people come out here from California, they can't believe it," said Kovan Muratt, 22, a student at Middle Tennessee State University. In the early 1990s, his Kurdish family was resettled in Nashville after four years in a Turkish refugee camp.

Refugees have continued to be settled in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, the top three cities on the Brookings list. But in the latter part of 2007, the average cost of a two-bedroom apartment in Chicago was \$1,424 a month, according to Nashville Chamber of Commerce data. The average two-bedroom apartment in Nashville cost \$687.

"Refugees are being resettled in Nashville for the same reasons that area is a good place for you and I to live," said Holly Johnson. She is director of refugee and immigration services at Catholic Charities in Nashville, one of two agencies that assist resettled refugees.

Resettlement agencies secure apartments for refugees and help them obtain identification, jobs and language training. The typical refugee family works with a caseworker for about six months, Johnson said.

Federal funds provide cash assistance for eight months to refugees resettled in the U.S.

Today, Nashville's schools have the capacity to serve students in 131 languages and provide English as a Second Language courses for adults. Metro's Social Services Department and grants from the Tennessee Department of Health and Human Services to agencies such as the Sudanese Community and Women's Services Center, the Somali Community Center and Kurdish Human Rights Watch have also created a limited network of services for refugees.

Hate, laws are problems

But the Nashville area isn't necessarily a refugee utopia.

Federal authorities have charged three men, two of whom said they belong to a white supremacist movement, with burning a mosque in Columbia, Tenn., and painting racist messages on it. Such an event can remind refugees of the potentially deadly religious, ethnic, tribal or political persecution they faced in their home countries.

And laws aimed at making it more difficult for illegal immigrants to obtain jobs or publicly financed benefits have also affected refugees.

Gutluak Thach, executive director of Nashville's Sudanese Community & Women's Services Center, is himself a Sudanese refugee who went on to graduate from TSU. He is grateful for the life he has been able to shape in Nashville. But his work has also made him very aware of just how difficult that can be.

In the United States, many employers do not provide low-wage and entry-level employees with health insurance, Thach said. Refugees officially resettled in Tennessee are given TennCare coverage until they find work. But they must live in Tennessee an additional five years before they can become eligible again.

"Here, you can do the work, pay the taxes but not get the benefits," Thach said. "That is a part of living in Nashville, too."
