



CHURCH WORLD SERVICE

Somali Bantu resettlement: background information

Who are the Somali Bantu?

The Somali Bantu are a distinct group of refugees among the hundreds of thousands who fled the civil war in Somalia in the 1990s. The descendants of slaves taken from southeastern Africa in the Indian Ocean slave trade, they represent several Bantu-speaking tribes with origins in Tanzania, Mozambique and Malawi. Their ancestors were those who managed to escape or were freed in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, settling in villages in the Juba River valley near the Somalia-Kenya border.

In their new home, the Bantu constituted the backbone of southern Somali agriculture as peasant farmers and plantation workers, and in many cases were exploited as cheap labor. Since Somalia's independence in 1960, the Bantu people were increasingly denied land tenure, educational and political opportunities, and civil rights. Attendance in middle and high schools was limited to those who could afford to send their children to the cities, and as a result, few Somali Bantu have been able to pursue university studies.

When civil war broke out in Somalia, the Bantu were terrorized by militia groups. Because of the tradition of discrimination against the Bantu people, and because they had food stocks, they became targets for looting. As plantations and state farms were destroyed, the Bantu in the Juba River valley lost all means of survival.

Between 1992 and 1993 more than 9,000 Somali Bantu fled to refugee camps in Kenya, where they continued to endure discrimination and bandit attacks at a disproportionately high rate compared to other refugee groups.

The Somali Bantu nevertheless have managed to thrive in the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps by drawing on their agricultural skills and community cooperation. Although they made up only 10 percent of the 130,000 refugees in Dadaab, they held over 90 percent of the heavy labor, construction, cooking, cleaning and other manual labor jobs. As a community, the Somali Bantu have gained a reputation for being both industrious and adaptable.

Why are the Somali Bantu being brought to the United States?

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) sought a permanent solution for these vulnerable refugees for a decade before the U.S. government, a leader in refugee resettlement, agreed to admit the group through the U.S. refugee resettlement program. Resettlement originally was sought in Tanzania, the ancestral homeland for many of the Somali Bantu, in 1993-94, and later in Mozambique in 1997-98, but neither effort was successful.

The Somali Bantu were recognized by the U.S. government as an extremely vulnerable refugee population, unable to safely return to their homes in Somalia even if peace should be restored there. To the credit of the U.S. State Department, and with the help of Americans living in the communities where these refugees are coming to make their homes, the Somali Bantu are getting a fresh chance to live their lives in peace and freedom. Accepting and welcoming the Somali Bantu extends the vital American tradition of opening its doors to people fleeing persecution. In addition the Somali Bantu

have made conscious decisions to be resettled in the United States with the understanding and expectation of becoming productive members of society.

How many Somali Bantu refugees are being resettled in the U.S.?

About 13,000 individuals are being resettled in the United States by nine non-governmental organizations over the course of a couple years. Bantu refugees began arriving in May 2003.

What services are provided to refugees and who pays for it?

Federal and state governments already have allocated resources for refugee assistance. This includes assistance with short-term basic needs and services like housing, food, health checkups and clothing. Resettlement organizations and their affiliates fill in the gaps through church support, grants and private donations, and continue to provide support after government funding ends.

We are thankful to live in a generous and welcoming country. Dedicated churches and volunteers help newly arriving refugee families settle in and adjust, and local businesses and community members consistently exhibit good will by providing jobs and donating material items and services.

Over the years, the United States has received refugees from many countries and has been able to successfully support their entry into the society. Many refugee groups have traditions different from those of mainstream Americans.

While the Somali Bantu have been labeled as one of the most culturally and economically oppressed groups in the world, they have proven to be positive in their desires to succeed, highly adaptable and industrious.

Since the first Somali Bantu arrived in the spring of 2003 in cities across the United States, communities have reached out to assist these refugees in ways that have expanded the capacities of both refugees and community.

Although the orientation period may be challenging, with good community support, Somali Bantu have learned English, obtained employment and learned to drive. Their children have entered school, are learning and are adjusting rapidly, as children do; and are making new friends.

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