Newest refugees seeking shelter from civil war

By JOHN SEMIEN
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In a rooming house on Louisiana Street, Mohamed Mead Maydane and his friend Makele Tesfamariam contemplate their future in America.

Both men are refugees from a guerrilla war in Ethiopia. They are some of the steady stream of refugees who have come to the Baton Rouge area from around the world. But they are the first Ethiopians to be helped by the Catholic Diocese Refugee Resettlement Program.

Although both men had careers in their own country, they set out for the U.S. with little understanding of the English language or American customs, a disadvantage in an already tight job market.

But with the help of the Resettlement Program, they have begun learning the language and the customs and hope to make a new life.

Mohamed is tall and thin with a quick smile and an animated style of speaking. He speaks some English and acts as an interpreter for Makele, who speaks very little English.

Mohamed says he had just graduated from high school when he left Ethiopia for Somalia, where he attended college and became a teacher in a refugee camp there.

After three years in the camp, he finally got a chance to come to America in late 1982, he says. His smile fades and his face becomes taut as he explains what has brought him so far away from home.

"In my country there was a problem of conflict between my people and the Ethiopian government," he says. "They take the property of a person such as land or tractors and houses.

"So many people were killed by the communists and thousands put in jail. They are killing the people who don't believe in their ideology."

Makele displays a book from Ethiopia filled with pictures of guerrilla skirmishes and confiscated weapons.

In other photos, Ethiopians march in protest. "Communists," he says, pointing to the photos.

Mohamed says he finally decided to leave Ethiopia when his father was killed in 1976.

"The main reason was when my father was killed," he says. "The Ethiopian soldiers killed him. They suspected he was aiding the guerrillas and they killed him."

The refugee camp in Somalia was large, holding about 80,000 refugees. His wife, Oolabo, is still in the camp.

I write letters to her and she sends me letters back," Mohamed says, producing a folded letter. His face lights up as he pulls out a folder of photographs from his wedding, pointing out members of his family.

Mohamed is making plans, through the Resettlement Program, to bring his wife to Baton Rouge, he says.

While in Somalia, Mohamed says he made frequent visits back to Ethiopia as an interpreter for foreign correspondents covering the conflict.

Sometimes we took them inside and they would see the guerrilla fighters," he says. "Different organizations would come to see the liberation fighters as well as the refugees and I acted as a translator at that time."

Mohamed says he was not afraid of the danger involved in such trips.

"That's my country," he says with a smile. "The people are my people and the land, my country, so no problem."

Makele was a traffic policeman in Ethiopia before he left the country for Sudan, where he became an electrician, he says. He has very little to say about his life in Ethiopia, except that he does not like communism.

"The Ethiopian government believes in communism and I don't believe in communism," he says.

Mohamed Mead Maybane and Mamele Tesfamariam relax in the apartment they share in communism and I don't believe in communism," he says.

Both men agree that mastering English and finding a job are the main problems they face in making a new beginning. But besides learning English the two men, from different tribes, have some problems communicating between themselves.

"We thought Makele would be a good roommate for Mohamed because they are from the same country," says Lenora Maitao, a caseworker for the program. "But they are from different tribes and they speak different languages."

"Sometimes I don't understand what he says," Mohamed says with a smile. "Sometimes he doesn't understand what I say."

Mohamed is a Muslim and a member of the Ogdane tribe. Makele, a Christian, is a member of the Eritrea tribe.

But they have been able to communicate through their limited knowledge of a common language spoken in the country, Mohamed says.

Even with the problems that go with starting life over in a new country, the two men say they like the freedom and opportunity of America.

"It's good," Mohamed says with a smile. "I'd like to stay in the United States to live."

Makele agreed.

"I like it," he says. "I'd like to work and then go back to school."