Welcoming the newest Louisianians

By JOHN SEMIEN
Advocate staff writer

The long hall connecting the offices of the Refugee Resettlement Program program bustles with activity. Caseworkers hurry back and forth, meeting with the Ethiopians who sit chatting and joking with one another, then with the old Vietnamese woman sitting patiently beside the desk, then with the Vietnamese family.

A Cuban refugee is conversing in Spanish with caseworker Lenora Maatouk.

It's a typical day. Since the government of South Vietnam fell in 1975, the program has helped nearly 1,400 refugees settle in the Baton Rouge area. As unrest grew in other parts of the world, another 300 refugees from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Laos, Cambodia, Cuba and Poland fled their countries and found their way to Baton Rouge.

"A lot of them come over with the typical immigrant's view of the United States, streets paved with gold, the whole bit," Ms. Maatouk says. "It's a little bit disillusioning when they find out that a lot of us have been here working all of our lives and it's still kind of month to month."

It's no wonder they have that view, Ms. Maatouk says, considering the American television shows beamed around the world.

"Look at what they see on TV," she says.

"They see 'Dallas'... where everyone drives a Mercedes and they have a maid."

So, one of the purposes of the Resettlement Program is to separate the reality of life in the United States from the fantasy of the American dream.

Money for the program comes primarily from the federal government, with the Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge acting as the sponsoring agency, according to program director Diane G. Thomas.

Begun in 1975, the original scope of the program was to help find homes for those displaced by the Vietnam war. It has now become a placement center for all refugees.

The Refugee Resettlement Program gets 10 to 15 new arrivals a month, Ms. Thomas says. Last year the program settled about 400 refugees, she says.

Most of the refugees are former prisoners of a communist government, former U.S. government workers or persons with close relatives or sponsors in the United States, Ms. Thomas says.

"Once they are here in Baton Rouge they are required to come to our office for initial intake and we open a case file on them."

Ms. Thomas says the federal government has recently tightened controls on the number of refugees allowed to enter the country and has imposed strict requirements.

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for federal aid to refugees.

"The administration is really tightening up and there are fewer refugees coming into the United States," she says. "There has been a big turnaround in domestic resettlement. They are trying to decrease their dependency on welfare."

One primary objective of the Resettlement Program is to get refugees employed, Ms. Thomas says, and the success rate, so far, is good. The first group of Vietnamese refugees settled in Baton Rouge in the mid-1970s is now doing well.

"They are buying houses. Anyone who is old enough to work will work and they pool their money," Ms. Thomas says.

The refugees now include seven doctors practicing at various state institutions, and about 200 college students majoring mostly in chemical and mechanical engineering, she says.

The Vietnamese have formed communities in the Spanish Town Road area, in north Baton Rouge and near LSU, Ms. Thomas says. There are now three local Vietnamese grocery stores and one jewelry store. About 400 Vietnamese children are in public schools where they are learning English.

One of the toughest problems facing most refugees is learning English, Ms. Thomas says. Without a command of the language, they have trouble finding a job or learning to drive.

Despite working to blend into the local culture, refugees retain much of the culture of the countries from which they come. For instance, in February a group of Vietnamese gathered at the Catholic Life Center to celebrate Tet, the beginning of the lunar New Year.

The Refugee Resettlement Program hopes to open a community center in the Spanish Town Road area soon, Ms. Thomas says. The center will be in a house where there will be classes on how to do everyday household chores, she says.

But even with resettlement in America, many refugees still long for their homelands, she says.

"They love what the government has done for them and they have a high regard for the government, but if they had a chance and it was safe, they would probably want to go back," she says.

But with world problems increasing, there is no end in sight for refugee resettlement programs like the one here, she says.

"The only way it will ever end is when there is world peace."