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RESETTLEMENT OF SOMALI BANTU REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES

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INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the Refugee Council USA, we welcome this opportunity to present our experiences, successes, and challenges in resettling Somali Bantu refugees in the United States. We applaud the US government for providing refuge to one of the world's most vulnerable refugee groups who suffered for many years and who for decades were uncertain about their well being and their future. We share our experience in the spirit of full tripartite collaboration and welcome the discussion.

BACKGROUND

Some 14,000 Somali Bantu refugees, most of who have already arrived, have been approved for resettlement in the United States. Somali Bantu have long been a persecuted population, living in marginalized, sometimes slave-like conditions in East Africa, primarily in Somalia and Tanzania. When civil unrest took hold in Somalia in the early 1990s, many Somali Bantu fled to nearby Kenya, taking refuge in the Dadaab refugee camp. They remained in Dadaab for over ten years awaiting a durable solution. In 2001, the United National High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the US government recognized the Somali Bantu as a Priority-Two population, or group of special humanitarian concern, and they were recommended for resettlement in the United States.

Due to heightened security, threats in the Dadaab refugee camp, and processing challenges, the Somali Bantu were transported via buses to the Kakuma refugee camp in northern Kenya, where they awaited refugee screening, interview and immigration procedures. The journey to the Kakuma camp took approximately three days. Those whose medical conditions precluded them from traveling via bus were transported by airplane to Kakuma. Upon arrival at the Kakuma camp, the Somali Bantu were placed in Camp #5, in the northern section of the camp.

This paper will address the following:

- (1) Pre-arrival processing and challenges presented;
- (2) Pre-arrival planning, special needs and programmatic funding;
- (3) Post-arrival successes, experiences, and challenges.

PRE-ARRIVAL PROCESSING AND TRAVEL PREPARATION - KENYA

Processing such a large group of refugees presented many logistical challenges. Because of post-September 11 security concerns, the US government had to delay several circuit rides to the camp.

Though most Somali Bantu were able to establish a well founded fear of persecution, the interview process was lengthy due to the volume of individuals to be processed, conditions in the Kakuma camp and safety concerns for the refugees and US government personnel.

Although preparations had been made in Kakuma for the arrival of the Somali Bantu, their presence resulted in pressures as the existing camp and local community worked to absorb the large influx. Resources in the camp, never fully adequate to begin with were strained. Inevitably the Somali Bantu became the focus of the tension that arose.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) did an admirable job in providing medical clearance for the Somali Bantu who were approved for resettlement. Many refugees suffered poor health as a result of living for decades without treatment. Despite this, most conditions were treated in the camp through IOM clinics and health care facilities. A high rate of pregnancies among fertility aged women was noted, with some 40 births per week reported during the initial processing period.

Security procedures posed additional delays, with some Security Advisory Opinions (SAO), taking nearly six months to process. SAOs are conducted by US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and are required of certain refugees before admission to the United States. Some Somali Bantu who were approved for resettlement and cleared to travel for up to one year faced additional difficulties when SAO clearance took longer than expected and medical clearances had expired.

The International Rescue Committee, though a sub grant with IOM, implemented a *Survival Literacy Training Program* for all Somali Bantu adults in Kakuma in an effort to increase functional literacy in Math and English with a focus on practical skills needed for resettlement. IRC organized classes for thousands of Somali Bantu and trained over 100 Somali Bantu as teachers. Forty classrooms were set up throughout the Bantu area of the camp with classes offered throughout the day. Many women attended often with one or two young children in tow. Classrooms were Spartan containing only benches, a blackboard and a desk for the teacher. The program was originally developed to serve 2,500 students, but after four months almost 5,000 had attended classes 60% of whom were women.

Somali Bantu refugees also attended IOM's predeparture cultural orientation classes.

PRE-ARRIVAL PLANNING – UNITED STATES

In order to prepare receiving communities and ensure the provision of culturally appropriate service, Member resettlement organizations of RCUSA formed a *Somali Bantu Task Force*, which consisted of program and refugee processing staff of nine national resettlement agencies. The task force had as its mission the following objectives:

(1) Information exchange. All task force members agreed to share critical health, cultural and other information regarding the Somali Bantu. Some agencies had begun to establish working relationships with Somali Bantu individuals who were already in the United States. Others were receiving information through contact with refugee assistance staff overseas, as well as US government personnel. To maximize these efforts, the task force members agreed to meet monthly and to exchange information via email and conference call so that information shared would assist in the Somali Bantu resettlement planning process.

(2) Placement planning. The task force met regularly to carefully plan the placement of the Somali Bantu. To that end, Refugee Council USA members consulted with US government representatives and state refugee coordinators to develop a placement strategy that would satisfy the need to "cluster" the Somali Bantu in communities, while at the same time being cautious not to overburden any one

community with a large number of high-needs refugees. The final placement plan included participation of over 50 cities and limited local communities to no more than 600 Somali Bantu arrivals in one geographic area. Placement planning presented additional challenges due to a high instance of “cross-referenced” cases, which required resettlement in the same community by the same local agency.

(3) Case and community preparation. Because there was a considerable amount of time before the Somali Bantu would arrive in the United States, the task force was able to appropriately plan for their resettlement. In conjunction with IOM and representatives from the US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), RCUSA members participated in several meetings and conferences to address the anticipated cultural orientation needs of the Somali Bantu. Resettlement staff were invited to share best practices in service provision, community coordination, and local volunteer and family mentoring opportunities. A significant body of materials was developed and local resettlement staff were encouraged to distribute information widely throughout the community. Target community institutions and groups included public schools, health facilities, landlords and employers, law enforcement and the existing Somali communities.

(4) Services needs assessment. Prior to placement approval, all local sites completed a Somali Bantu resettlement needs assessment that was used to determine whether or not a community would be able to support Somali Bantu resettlement and if so, at what numerical level. The evaluation measured the availability and strength of the following service areas:

- Linguistically appropriate case management capacity.
- Cultural and community orientation planning.
- Local coordination and community capacity.
- Housing availability and affordability.
- Health care facilities and capacity.
- English language training and literacy programs.
- Employment availability and local economic conditions.
- Services for children and youth.
- Other specialized services, such as volunteer mentoring programs and family sponsorship.

(5) Proposal to the US government for additional funding. Supplemental funding from the US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement provided agencies with a three year grant that provides additional resources to augment basic resettlement and employment services. Because of the anticipated high needs among the Somali Bantu population, many agencies proposed to establish specialized literacy programs, extended orientation classes, and long-term family mentoring programs.

POST-ARRIVAL EXPERIENCES

Through May 2005, 12,007 Somali Bantu have resettled in the United States. Though most Somali Bantu have been eager to become employed and firmly resettle in their new communities, the population presented many challenges to local resettlement staff. These included:

- Lack of formal training or official work histories of any kind. Job skills and employment were difficult to obtain in the early stages.
- Formal education was low throughout the population. Low literacy levels were a barrier to employment. It was estimated that only 1% of the population was functional in English.¹

¹ IRC Kenya Adult Education Program statistics.

- The search for housing required additional staff resources due to large family sizes, number of children and the dramatic change in environment.
- A high pregnancy rate coupled with extensive health care needs and mental health concerns defined the multi-faceted health related challenge that the population and the agencies assisting them faced.
- Widespread malnutrition had been reported among the Somali Bantu population in Kenya due to difficult camp conditions.

Local agencies have responded through an increased level of community involvement, which included close coordination with volunteers, housing managers, employers, medical professionals, and school officials. Positive press and media attention in several communities resulted in an increased level of in-kind donations.

Resettlement agencies around the country have met the needs of the Somali Bantu by successfully implementing many innovative programs, which complement their traditional services. Some of these new enhanced services include financial literacy trainings, family literacy programs for mothers with preschool aged children, life-skills seminars, refugee youth academics and leadership tutoring, and conflict resolution. More innovative programs were also initiated, including the creation of Somali Bantu Learning Centers, quantitative analysis of home and hygiene surveys, the facilitation of cultural celebrations, and the creation of support and development “sewing circles” for Somali Bantu women. To increase the effectiveness of all programs and services, resettlement agencies partnered with a myriad of community partners, including Head Start, local YMCAs, fire and police chiefs, school superintendents and teachers, Johns Hopkins School of Nursing, University of Utah School of Occupational Therapy, Survivors of Torture International, the New American Center, and various other community and Muslim organizations.

NEXT STEPS

Some 1,779 individuals out of the original group have yet to arrive in the US. In addition, up to 1,000 individuals not originally processed with the first group may be eligible for resettlement.

As Somali Bantu families continue to adjust to life in the United States, resettlement agencies will continue to provide the services and community coordination that will most effectively benefit this population. One focus will be to increase the amount of time and resources dedicated to helping the Somali Bantu, particularly single mothers, prepare for, gain, and retain employment. Agencies will also concentrate on providing information on more complex issues, such as financial literacy, asset development, access to supportive housing services, basic computer usage, driving, parenting, and reproductive health care. Resettlement staff will continue to expand their network of community resources to include partnerships with vocational schools, housing assistance agencies, banks, employers, universities, and public and private social service providers. Additionally, resettlement staff will work with Somali Bantu groups and organizations by providing technical support and assistance. Resettlement agencies will continue to assist the Somali Bantu reach self-sufficiency by developing long-term partnerships and implementing an evolving service schedule that adjusts to the changing needs of clients.