

The Boise Weekly  
www.boiseweekly.com

JUNE 21, 2006

Immigration of Another Stripe  
Refugees considered terrorists under laws

By Carissa Wolf

John Williams' steady voice sounds almost bare of emotion when he talks about his parents and sister, and the only home he knew for the first 25 years of his life.

He's told the story so many times: He told Ghana government officials he boarded a ship with 16,000 other refugees. He told U.S. immigration workers how he took refuge in Ghana from war-torn Liberia. He told refugee aid volunteers how he waited almost 16 years for a place to call home. His regal accent accompanies his calming voice as he tells the story again: It was 1989 when the war started. It was October 6, 1990, when he and his sister went to the market. They returned to their Monrovia home to find they were homeless. A rebel group had flattened the family home with a bomb.

"When we got back, the house was down and unfortunately our parents were inside and dead," Williams said. "We had to turn around and flee for our lives."

Williams ran for 15 years. That flight ended less than three weeks ago, when Williams and his wife and son settled into an apartment in west Boise. Now, an Idaho driver's manual is his constant companion as he studies for the commercial driver's license exam. He hopes to one day drive a truck or work in construction.

On Williams' first day in Boise, an International Rescue Committee worker took him to Winco Foods. The next day they went to Albertson's. Williams' eyes smile when he talks about the \$150 donors gave him to buy food. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) arranged for housing, helps the family with transportation and found some furniture for the Williams' new apartment. IRC workers are often the first to aid refugees from war-torn or unstable countries.

"They gave us plates and spoons and even a toothbrush, too," Williams said.

Williams now joins about 3,000 refugees that call Boise home, according to the Idaho Office for Refugees. They come from 26 countries and represent as many as 38 different language groups.

But fewer refugees will find a safe haven in Boise because of laws that treat them like terrorists, according to refugee aid workers. As the international community celebrates World Refugee Day this week, advocates are struggling against post-September 11 fears

that have closed U.S. borders to the politically displaced and thousands of would-be U.S. citizens.

Laws that are meant to protect Americans from terrorists actually prevent terror victims from gaining sanctuary in the United States. At issue for refugee advocates are the Patriot Act of 2001 and the Real I.D. Act of 2005. Both acts expanded the definition of terrorist activities and the types of organizations considered terrorist. As a result, Department of Homeland Security staffers are screening refugees who may have provided in-kind or monetary support under coercion to armed groups, on the grounds that they provided "material support" to terrorists. Refugees International contends this interpretation of U.S. law is resulting in a perverse outcome: Victims of terrorism are labeled terrorists and denied sanctuary.

"It doesn't matter if material support was given under duress or at gunpoint," said Christina Bruce-Bennion, director of the Boise-based Agency for New Americans, a refugee relocation organization.

"The bottom line is that anyone who has been involved in fighting forces or involved in violent activities or have been supportive of those groups in any fashion could be barred entry into the United States and that could even mean allies of the United States," IRC senior vice president George Biddle said in a telephone interview.

Biddle said Columbians who have been forced to provide a meal to guerrilla factions could be denied asylum in the United States under the laws, even if their help was coerced. Refugees International has documented armed groups terrorizing local communities and forcing them to donate food and other supplies under threat of torture, kidnapping or execution. About 70 percent of Colombian refugees who would otherwise be suitable for U.S. refugee resettlement have been forced by Colombian armed groups to pay "taxes" or other forms of coerced payments, according to Refugee Council USA, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

But it's very difficult for many Columbians to gain refugee status since the implementation of the Patriot and Real ID Acts, Bruce-Bennion said. Burmese refugees in Thailand and Malaysia face similar situations.

Leslye Boban, regional resettlement director with IRC's Boise office said the laws have had detrimental effects on refugee populations across the world, especially since the United States has historically been the top destination country for refugees worldwide.

During the first Bush presidency in the early 1990s, the United States gave refuge to about 120,000 refugees annually. During the Clinton years, that number shrank to 90,000. This year, allocations have been made to allow 70,000 refugees to enter the United States, but the IRC estimates that only 45,000 refugees will actually be allowed to enter. Roughly 600 to 700 of those refugees will make their way to Boise for permanent resettlement this year.

The refugees who are denied entry into the United States under anti-terrorist laws often languish in refugee camps, Boban said. Many of the 10,000 refugees living at the Al Mashtjal Camp in Sudan's North Darfur construct shelters from any sort of material they can find. A Ghana camp where Williams temporarily settled was nothing more than a sea of tents constructed from tarps. The tents had no doors and provided inadequate protection from the elements. Snakes and scorpions were a constant threat to sleeping refugees.

"A lot of us died from snake and scorpion bites," Williams said.

Williams now calls a modern, modest Boise apartment his home. It's one of the amenities that make Boise what relocation organizations call a "preferred" resettlement city. There's affordable housing, and jobs. It's not too big of a city nor too small. Social and medical services can adapt to the needs of newcomers. And people are welcoming and willing to lend their help, Williams said, making him want to return the favor in some way.

"I just want to put a smile on someone's face, too," he said.

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