

Somali Bantu Background Resettlement 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 Somali-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 have nevertheless 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 States is a leader in refugee resettlement. 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 will come to make their homes, the Somali Bantu will get 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 will be resettled in the United States?

About 13,000 individuals will be 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 have already allocated resources for refugee assistance. This includes assistance with short-term basic needs and services like housing, food, health checkups and clothing. Resettlement organizations fill in the gaps through grants and private donations, and continue to provide support after government funding ends.

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

Destination communities across the country have existing capacity to meet the needs of the Somali Bantu refugees, so their arrival should not be a burden locally. And time and time again we have seen that in a short period of time refugees gain self-sufficiency and contribute immensely to their communities.



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