

# REFUGEES

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*America  
here we  
come*





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**Cover:** Somali Bantu: Heading for a new life.

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# REFUGEES

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**4** After a lifetime as feudal serfs and a decade as refugees, nearly 12,000 so-called Somali Bantu are preparing to leave for a new life in the United States.



UNHCR/R. WILKINSON/CS+KEN+2002

**16** A Bantu woman prepares a traditional basket in front of her mud-plaster home where she has spent 10 years as a refugee in a Kenyan camp.



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**26** After several failed attempts to find a new, permanent home, the Bantu set out on the first stage of a new life in the United States.

2

## EDITORIAL

A few lucky refugees.

4

## COVER STORY

The Somali Bantu.

Last days in Dadaab.

12

## History

The slave trail.

16

## Exile

A decade in a refugee camp.

22

## The search

Trying to find a solution.

25

## The 'other' Bantu

A second group finds a different solution.

26

## Salvation

Flight to freedom.

# A lucky few

When the nation-state of Somalia collapsed into a series of warring fiefdoms in the early 1990s, hundreds of thousands of civilians fled for their lives.



Some have since returned home, but many are still refugees, principally in neighboring Kenya, with little idea of when, if ever, it will be safe for them to return home.

A lucky few, however, will soon be starting an unbelievable journey, swapping a lifetime of poverty and semi-slavery and years of exile in a refugee camp for a new and totally different life in the United States.

For a decade the U.N. refugee agency tried to find a new country for approximately 12,000 so-called Somali Bantu, a group whose ancestors were seized by Arab slavers from their ancestral homelands, who continued to be widely discriminated against and victimized in their 'new' home in Somalia prior to the war and who vowed they would not return to that country even if peace is restored.

After two early attempts to relocate the Somali Bantu failed, Washington has now agreed to take the bulk of the group—subject to final vetting which is currently underway.

Seventeen countries annually accept for permanent resettlement around 100,000 particularly vulnerable people from among the 12 million refugees UNHCR cares for, but who, for various reasons, cannot go home whatever the state of their country.

Traditional 'hosts' such as the United States, Canada, Australia and the Scandinavian countries accept the bulk of the resettlement cases, but increasingly states as diverse as Iceland, Brazil and Benin have also participated.

Resettlement can be both highly prized and highly politicized. At the height of the Cold War, for instance, refugees fleeing the Soviet bloc were openly welcomed in the West which also underwrote a worldwide program to resettle Indochinese refugees in the wake of the Viet Nam war.

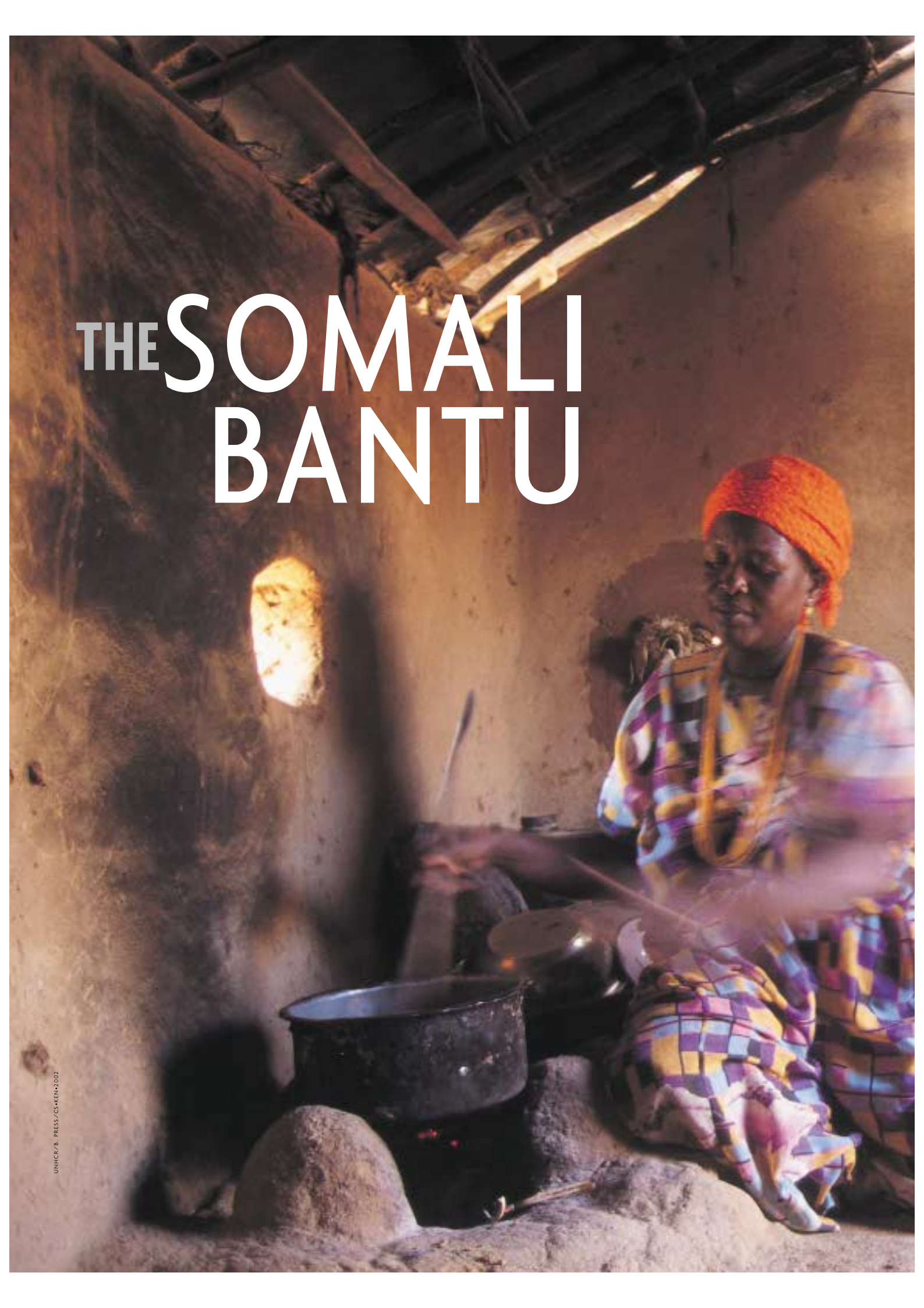
Encouragingly, resettlement countries recently became more flexible in responding to the needs of less high profile groups, especially from Africa.

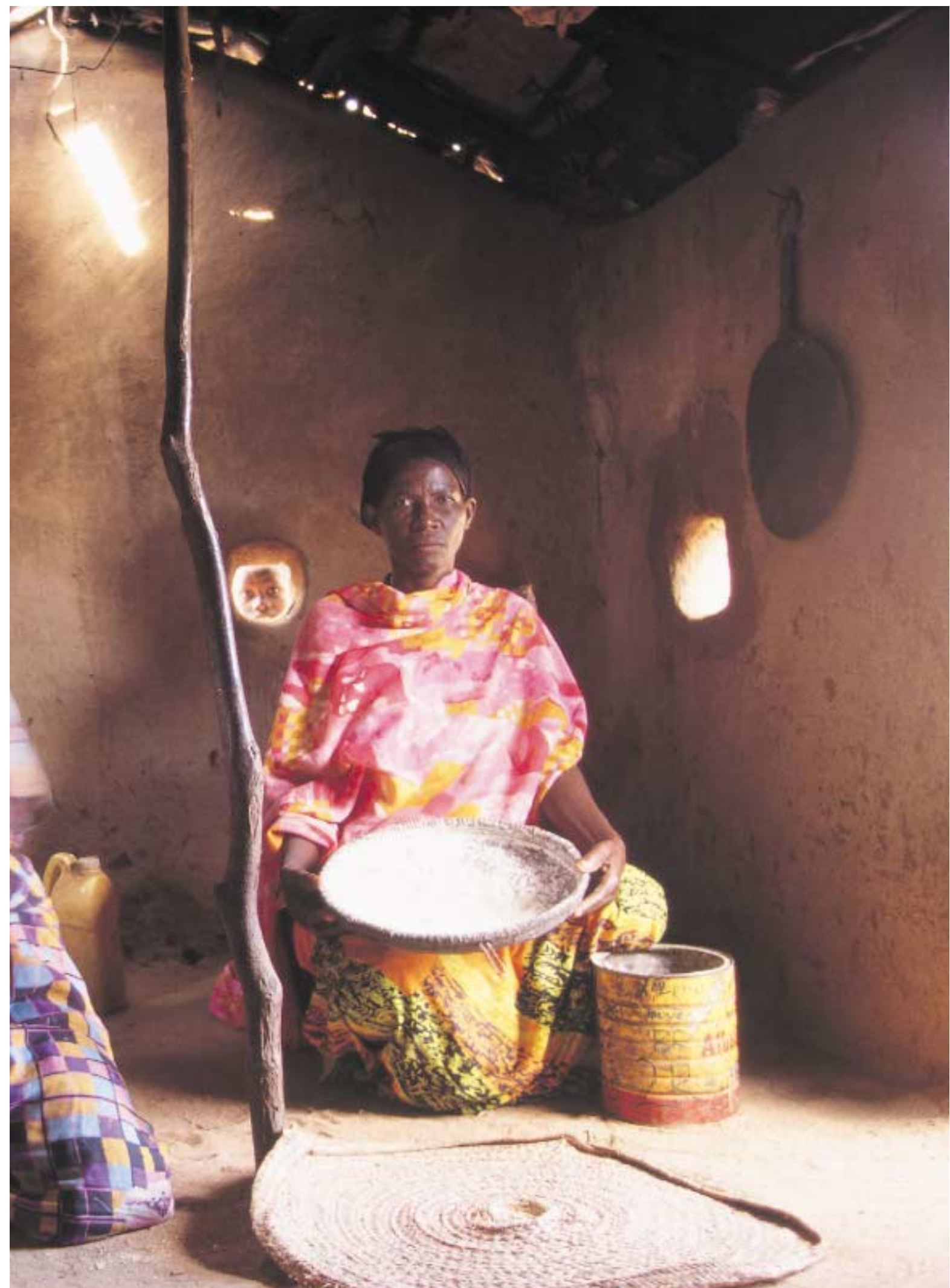
But these resettlement programs, no matter how welcome, cannot accommodate every deserving case. In Kenya's Dadaab and Kakuma camps, Somali refugees who fled the same conflict as the Bantu have watched the resettlement process with both anguish and anger, a single question burned into their faces: "Why can't we go too?"

The Bantu now face a frightening cultural chasm. Most cannot read, write or speak English. They are sturdy farmworkers with few other skills, who have never turned on an electric light switch, used a flush toilet, crossed a busy street, ridden in a car or on an elevator, seen snow or experienced air conditioning.

But as one said in the following report on the Bantu, their history, years in exile, and now this incredible new adventure, the choice between America and Somalia is "between the fire and paradise."

# THE SOMALI BANTU





# Last days in Dadaab

**T**HERE IS A *FRISSON* OF BOTH EXCITEMENT and fear in the air. Families cluster noisily around a row of rickety field tables answering last minute questions, surrendering crumpled scraps of paper—dirty and dog-eared—but which have effectively defined who they are, what they can eat and where they can live for years.

Hordes of children are slung casually on the backs of their mothers or tug at their brightly colored dresses of swirling yellows, blues, reds and orange.

One group of women squats under a tree, carefully watching, rarely speaking, as the line moves slowly forward through an open-sided shed, its tin roof the only shade against a fierce equatorial sun.

A young man, despair etched clearly on his face, approaches any *muzungu* (foreigner) he sees and pleads: “My sister has already been selected to go. I have been rejected. Why? I must go with her. Please help me.” He circles the compound incessantly.

Andrew Hopkins, a UNHCR resettlement officer who has been heavily involved in this process for many months, abruptly calls everyone together feeling he must once more explain, cajole and reassure an anxious crowd.

Local policemen, dressed in military fatigues and armed with ancient rifles, stand guard amidst clouds of fine red dirt flung up by the constant movement of hundreds of people.

Outside the barbed wire fence surrounding the enclosure other small groups watch intently, their sullen expressions delivering a clear message: Why them? Why not us?

## **HIGH STAKES**

This could be a typical scene on any given day in any refugee camp in any part of the world.

Today’s gathering, however, is something special—the stakes for the people inside the barbed wire unimaginably high.

For a decade officials of the U.N. refugee agency have been trying to find new homes for thousands of people whose ancestors were ripped out of central Africa as slaves in the 18th and 19th centuries and who spent their own lives in feudal bondage in Somalia.

When that state collapsed in an orgy of bloodletting in the early 1990s they, along with hundreds of thousands of other civilians, fled to neighboring Kenya. But even here, in the semi-arid wastes of the complex of refugee camps known collectively as Dadaab, among other peoples who have also lost their country, their homes, families and possessions, this particular group says it has not been able to escape history, continuing to be treated as serfs by their neighbors.

But this is about to change, and in the most dramatic fashion, for these people who are referred to simply as the Somali Bantu.

Today is D-day minus two. Tomorrow, on D-day minus one, they will transfer to a transit center for an overnight stay and early the following morning, barring any last minute setback, will board buses, and for the sick and pregnant a battered, ancient Andover aircraft, on the first stage of a breathtaking journey from a semi-slave past to a future of unlimited freedom and choice.

Incongruously, the first stop is yet another refugee camp called Kakuma, in the northwest part of Kenya, chosen because Dadaab is considered too insecure to process such a large number of people. In Kakuma the Bantu will be vetted by immigration officials, medically examined, receive a crash course in cultural orientation and what officials describe as 'basic survival skills' on how to adapt in their new home.

In early 2003, nearly 12,000 people will begin to

fly to cities and towns across the United States in the largest ever resettlement program undertaken out of Africa.

Refugees moving to a strange land must always make major cultural adjustments. But rarely is the gap as wide as the one the Somali Bantu must now bridge on their way to North America.

All of them, until this moment, have lived lives of feudal serfs. Democratic choice, cultural freedoms

are alien concepts. Few Bantu can read, write or speak anything other than local dialects. They must be taught the simplest of things—how to use electrical light switches, flush toilets and operate cookers.

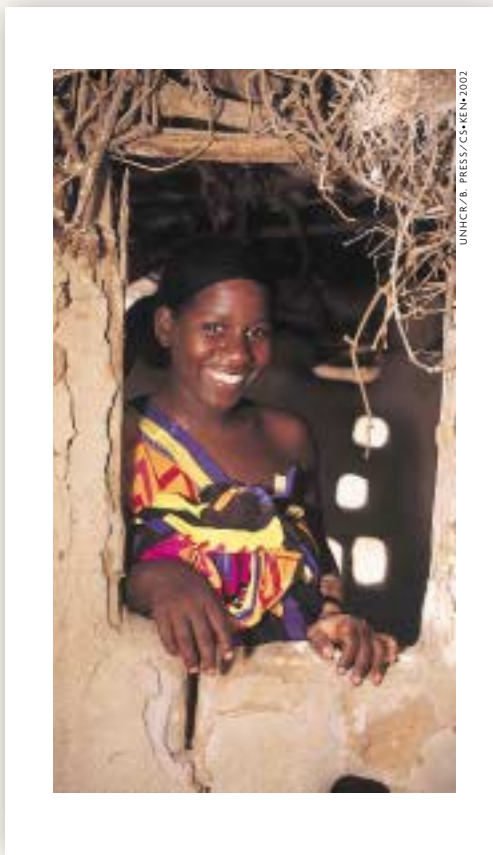
The Bantu live in squat mud-plaster huts. Most have never even been in a town and the tallest building most have seen is two storeys high. Few have ridden in a car and even fewer in an aircraft. They have no knowledge of where America is, what its climate, food, schools or labor markets are like.

With charming naivety, the Bantu are undaunted by such obstacles. "Take us to America. We will learn to adapt," a group of elders tells a visitor with confidence.

The alternative is appalling, especially with such a magnificent and unexpected

prize now within reach. For those refugees in Dadaab who have been rejected or, in the case of the majority who have not been offered the chance, the future is bleak. They face years more in a fly-blown refugee camp or, if Somalia is ever patched back together again, the return to a grinding existence in one of the world's poorest and most inhospitable regions.

The people on both sides of the barbed wire are only too aware of this massive divide, that the luck of the draw has dealt them very different futures.



## TENSION MOUNTS

D-day minus one. Before dawn the Bantu scheduled to leave the following day stand or sit in an orderly line outside a transit center. The police are present in force.

Refugees have stacked the few goods they will take with them on the first leg of their journey—pots and pans, yellow and white jerseys, bedding and in some cases old bicycles—neatly against the barbed wire perimeter.

One by one the families are admitted to the compound where they undergo yet more ‘final’ checks before spending the night on the hard dirt floors of transit sheds built of burlap and twig sidings and tin roofs.

Tension is high. Thousands of non-Bantu have tried to gate-crash the vetting process in the last few months bribing and bullying genuine applicants, trying to infiltrate their own relatives into the procedure. Some continue to prowl the outskirts of the compound aware that an approved slot on the list is beyond price to any refugee who has spent years in such a place.

To forestall trouble, the perimeter has been reinforced with a double barbed wire fence. Floodlights have been added. Guards patrol 24 hours a day.

A Somali threatens to kill a Bantu, apparently because one of his own family has been rejected. The scuffle is broken up.

After years of living in a mind-numbing limbo, the Bantu now just want to be rid of Dadaab. One elder causes hilarity among his friends when he recounts a nightmare the previous evening: “I began dreaming—of tall buildings and then of buses pulling up and leaving without me. I woke up, shook my wife out of bed and told her ‘Everyone is leaving. Let’s get out of here.’”

The laborious processing continues throughout the day until officials receive an emergency telephone call from Kakuma. There has been an incident there. At least one Kenyan has been shot dead in a clash with police and officials at the camp in a business dispute. It is decided that tomorrow’s movement of Bantu to Kakuma will be cancelled, hopefully only for a couple of days.

Elders are summoned. The postponement is transmitted to the waiting Bantu. At the last minute, they must leave the heavily guarded transit center and return to their homes—some of which have already been demolished in anticipation of their leaving—to once more mingle with potentially hostile neighbors and await further word.

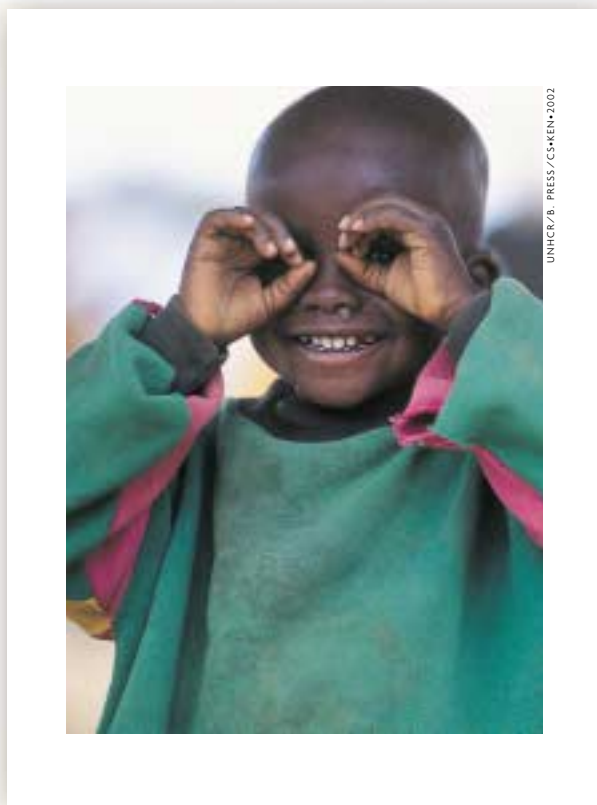
People recall the September 11 terror attacks in the United States, word of which filtered down even to the crowded alleyways of Dadaab. Refugees are well aware that those attacks severely disrupted America’s policy of admitting as many as 70,000 refugees for permanent resettlement this year. Could

this be another major setback, a sad case of ‘So near and yet so far.’

“Yes we have heard of those events,” says 40-year-old Mohammed Yarow, a former subsistence farmer with a wife and five children. “We are worried it will destroy our dream.”

Fifty-two-year-old Mussa Kumula Mohammed is partly paralyzed from an attack by Somali militias during the collapse of that country and says he will never, under any circumstances, return there. But like many of the Bantu, he is sanguine and shrugs at the latest news, “We have been waiting for this for so many years. We will be patient for another few days. We do not feel bad.”

He limps painfully back to his abandoned mud-brick house, uncertain once more what the future holds.







UNHCR/R. WILKINSON/CS•KEN•2002

**Just a few belongings.**



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**Processing begins.**



Lining up for a new life.

UNHCR/B. PRESS/CSKEN-2002



**Ration cards:** a most invaluable document for a refugee.



UNHCR/B. PRESS/CSKEN-2002

# The slave trail

Centuries ago, in one of Africa's major migrations, Bantu-speaking peoples trekked from west and central parts of the continent, eastwards toward the Horn of Africa and south through modern day Tanzania, Mozambique and Malawi.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Arab slavers armed with muskets and whips plundered those southern regions, capturing and shipping untold numbers of Bantu men, women and children via Zanzibar's great slave market to the Persian Gulf and Middle East.

Some ended up in Somalia, but without a written language, today's Somali Bantu retain only patchy memories of their early history, told to them through song, dance and oral history.

The Arabs apparently tried to entice the natives away with promises of a better future before resorting to brute force, according to the Bantu in Dadaab. There was great famine abroad at the time and the slavers introduced them to the date fruit which they had never eaten before and promised to take them to a land where there

was plenty of food and work. The name Said Berkash is repeated in many of these tales as one of the leading slavers.

The whip soon replaced persuasion and snippets of songs from that brutal era remain. One Arab refrain began:

These are our slaves  
Let us make use of them  
Let them not escape  
For if they unite, they will be stronger

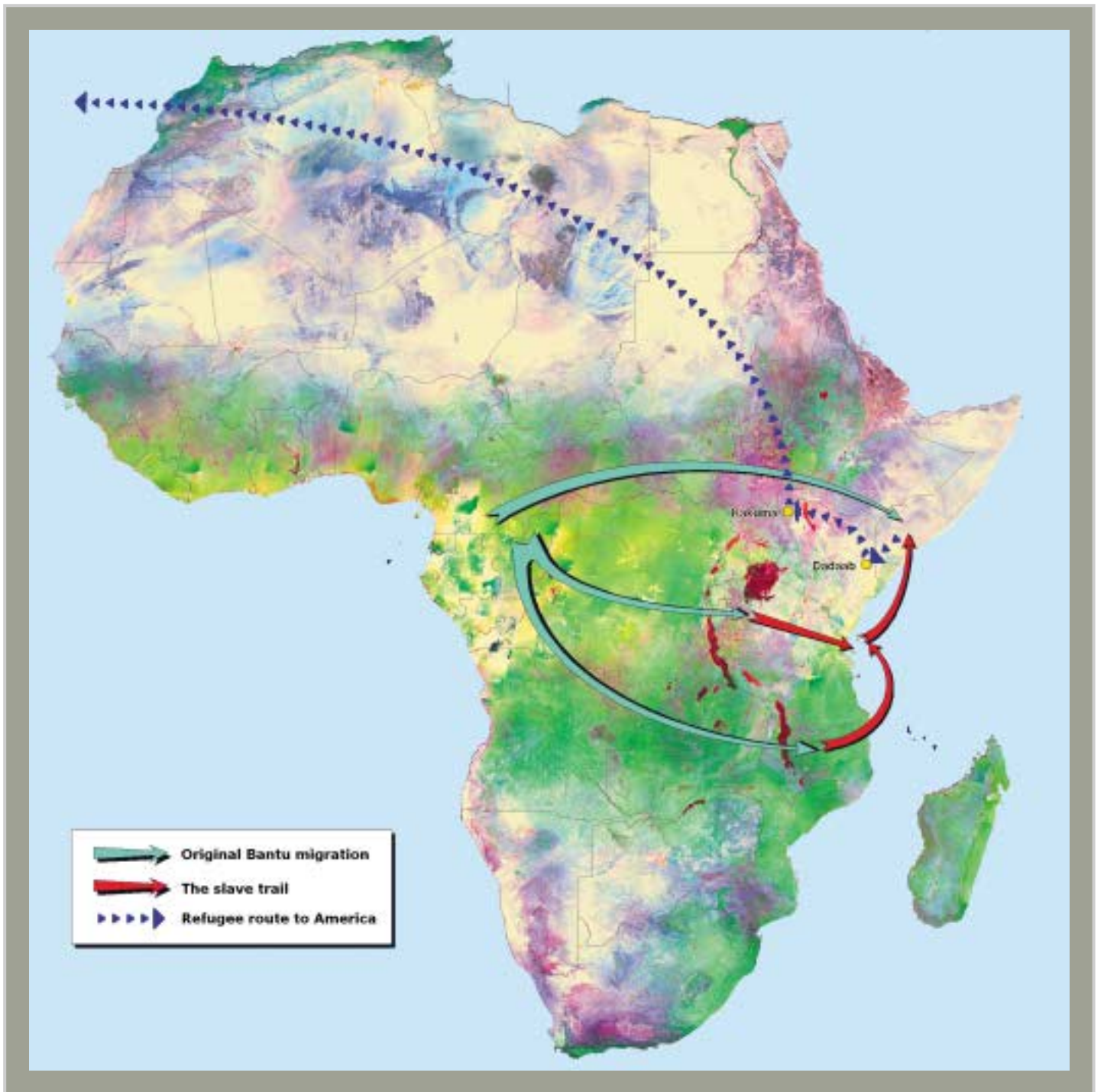
The slaves responded in a local tongue not understood by the slavers:

This slavery  
We pray to God to free us  
from it  
We pray to God to get us to a  
better place  
May God protect us  
The slavery you subject us to  
You will be subject to it one  
day

The slaves, principally  
from six southeast African



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tribes including the Yao, Makua, Nyanja, Ngidono, Zigua and Zaramo, were settled primarily in Somalia's lower Juba River valley.

They eventually obtained a degree of freedom during the colonial era, but continued to be treated as second-class citizens, unlike the Bantu who had arrived during the early migrations and who were by this time fully integrated into Somali society.

Cultural, linguistic and sharp physical differences still set the two groups apart. The Somalis are lighter skinned and with sharply angular faces and bodies, the Bantu darker and with heavier features. There has been no comingling or intermarriage. The Bantu were discouraged from sending their children to school, denied any meaningful land tenure or political representation.

They were not allowed to become officers in the army or police. Parents riding a bus say they remember ethnic Somalis taunting them, "You stink. Get away from here." Though highly industrious, they filled only the most menial jobs, principally working on the land, only occasionally owning their own property. Ironically, their existence had many parallels with former slaves in America's deep south until that country's 1960s civil rights movement changed history.

### SPECIAL TARGETS

All civilians in Somalia suffered terribly at the hands of gunmen from various clans when the country fell apart following the 1991 overthrow of former dictator Mohamed Siad Barre. The Somali Bantu—also known

by the all-embracing word *Mushungulis* commonly translated these days as slave people—were particular targets for the marauders—despised, defenseless and often owning vital food stocks.

Five gunmen visited Mohammed Yarow's small-holding at 8 one morning in 1992 demanding money. When he told them he had only the pot of beans cooking

over an open fire, they stripped him, tied him up and told his wife they would kill him. Instead, they also stripped his wife and raped her in front of him. A neighbor who tried to intervene was shot dead.

The gunmen finally left, but Mohammed Yarow refused to allow his wife to untie him until the following day, fearful the thugs might return and kill the entire family.

They spent weeks roaming the countryside, begging for food and scavenging before finally reaching Kenya.

Another group attacked Abdullahi Ali Ahmed's home town in Juba province the same year. "We were good targets for all the warring militias," he said. "We did not have any clan to protect us and we had food. They shot dead maybe 20 people in front of me. Three were my relatives.

atives.

"I escaped, but I had no food, no clothes and no money," he said. Abdullahi spent four days on the road, also begging and watching old people and children die by the wayside, before crossing the border.

Thousands of *Mushungulis*, with tales similar to Abdullahi's to tell, eventually reached Kenya. But though they may have escaped the terror of Somalia, a new chapter of misery was about to begin.





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**Waiting anxiously to begin life afresh.**

# Life in exile

**F**atumo Arbo Ambar says she is 70 years old. Her face carries wrinkles even deeper than that, but when a visitor arrives unexpectedly she bounces up from the wooden plank in front of her home and thumps out a traditional ‘bump and grind’ dance as a welcome, much to the delight of her neighbors.

Her husband died in 1990 shortly before total war engulfed Somalia. Her eight children followed one by one. Four were murdered during ‘the troubles’. Four died of illness.

She must now help to support nine grandchildren almost single-handedly. This improbable group—an elderly grandmother and her ‘family’ ranging in age from a one-year-old girl to a 30-year-old granddaughter—are all ticketed to make what for them will be the incredible journey to the

United States within a few months.

For now though, home is a traditional tiny mud-plaster hut measuring nine feet by six feet containing a few blackened pots and pans and a large rickety bed frame.

Many refugees like Fatumo escape with virtually nothing—a battered suitcase, a few pots and pans, perhaps a bedroll. The great majority anticipate, or perhaps simply hope, they will return home within a matter of weeks or months once their emergency is peacefully resolved. Many, however, may spend a lifetime in exile.

The Somali exodus has turned into what is officially called a ‘protracted crisis’—a crisis seemingly without end.

As thousands and then tens of thousands of Somalis poured into Kenya from their collapsing nation-state in the early 1990s, the government in Nairobi, in consultation with

UNHCR, faced the tricky dilemma of where to house this human flood.

Security is always a major concern in such cir-





cumstances. Host countries themselves can be destabilized by the sudden arrival of huge numbers of people, especially if they include escaping armed militias as in the case of Somalia, or a few years later, Rwanda.

The welfare of local communities, their jobs and farms, must be protected. At the same time, basic facilities such as water and shelter, must be made available for the refugees. Balancing all of those considerations always involves a delicate compromise.

Kenya established a series of camps near its Indian Ocean coastline and another center near the tiny village of Dadaab, a wild, semi-desert region of tiny sand-blown settlements, nomads, camels and goats and searing summer temperatures.

### REFUGEE CITY

Dadaab eventually ballooned into three separate camps sprawling for miles over the flat landscape, housing 120,000 mainly Somalis and Somali Bantu—a refugee city complete not only with an extensive humanitarian infrastructure, but also its own local bars, hotels, schools, clinics, banks, markets, mobile phone industry and small-scale farming plots.

This has become home or, as some refugees prefer to call it, their ‘prison’, for a decade. It is a stultifying existence eked out in one of the most inhospitable environs on earth. Daily life is strictly regimented and boredom is a way of life (some entrepreneurs piped in satellite television and during the recent World Cup, a group of Somali Bantu with access to the small screen made a point of cheering for the U.S. team in anticipation of their new home).

Refugees cannot travel outside the camps without special permission. Like all of her refugee neighbors, Fatumo survives on official food handouts consisting of a little corn, some oil, sugar and a few other condiments. Nevertheless, despite her age and the harshness of her life, Fatumo is a born actress with a determined *joie de*

*vivre*. She gestures dramatically emphasizing everything she says. “This is because of hunger,” she cackles, pulling at the loose flaps on her arms and coughing vigorously.

If she, or any other refugee, wants a few withered vegetables or a little meat, she must buy them in a local market. Each day she hauls buckets of water from a communal water point a half-mile away for more affluent Somali refugee neighbors. She weaves traditional mats in front of her hut. Each takes 10 days to complete and fetches the equivalent of three dollars in the local



UNHCR/B. PRESS/CS/KEN-2002

market.

Other Bantu earn a few Kenyan shillings employed in menial work. Some dig latrines. Others scour pots at a local market ‘restaurant’, sew garments on old-fashioned Singer machines in the noisy side streets or help build *dukas* (small shops).

In an effort to bring a degree of order into their chaotic lives, the Bantu drafted a constitution, directed principally by 27-year-old Abdullahi Ali Ahmed. He is already a rare success story, having taught himself English during his decade as a refugee and being nominated as the secretary-general of the Bantu community in Dadaab.

Among other things, the constitution pledges to “promote stability and harmony amongst the community, maintain law and order as well as respect for human rights.”

It promises specifically to “pursue zero tolerance policies” to eliminate corruption, help defend the community’s “sovereignty” against external influences, strengthen ties with the government and agencies such as UNHCR to benefit the Somali Bantu and implement policies only after widespread consultations with members.

But one thing has not changed, they say, from their earlier life in Somalia—the social pecking order.

The Bantu generally work for wealthier Somali refugees, but often receive payment for their work, not in money but ‘in kind’, having to shop at designated places in the market. Even there, Bantu say, they get a raw deal. “The Somalis own all the shops and they have three prices,” one said. “The first is for the Somalis. One is for the *muzungus* (foreigners) and then the last one is for the Bantu.”

Somalis, according to the Bantu, still expect them to ‘know their place’ in camp—at the back of the queue at the water point, shopping or boarding a bus.

### A CONSTANT DANGER

Violence is an ever-present threat. The young wife of the partly paralysed Mussa Kumula Mohammed, was raped two years ago by five men as she was collecting firewood outside the camp. Sexual violence has been endemic in Dadaab and is no respecter of ethnicity. All women face similar attacks regularly, but the Bantu say they are particular targets.

Communities have built barricades of high, thick prickly branches around their homes which offer lim-

ited protection. Lighting and site planning have been improved and UNHCR supplies some firewood directly to the refugees to try to cut down on the number of sexual attacks on the fringes of the complex.

Each of Dadaab’s three separate camps is zoned into blocs. In specially designated areas, groups of Bantu families build their homes around communal courtyards, many of the buildings colorfully decorated with flower, animal and abstract impressions.

On the fringe of these blocks, Bantu and Somali homes overlap, the round Somali *tukuls* built of tree branches and pieces of plastic contrasting sharply with the mud-plaster Bantu homes.

For a decade there has been an uneasy truce, sometimes punctured by violence, between the two communities, but as departure day approaches, the friction is obvious.

The Somalis are resentful that

the Bantu—second-class citizens at home after all—have been given perhaps the greatest prize a refugee can hope for: a new life in a developed country. In the narrow lanes, Somalis accost a visitor with quizzical, harsh glances and an occasional, soft query “Why can’t we go to America as well?”

They believe they are victims twice over—having fled the same violence as the Bantu, but now being discriminated against in the resettlement process. Their anger and frustration are barely contained.

The Bantu are anxious to leave before any further trouble develops. One elder tells UNHCR protection officer Linmei Li urgently “This is a bad place. It is dangerous. Even if we cannot go to the United States, get us out of here.” The officer tries to reassure the group, but acknowledges that not all the Somali Bantu will be accepted. Some must remain.





UNHCR/R. WILKINSON/CS-KEN2002

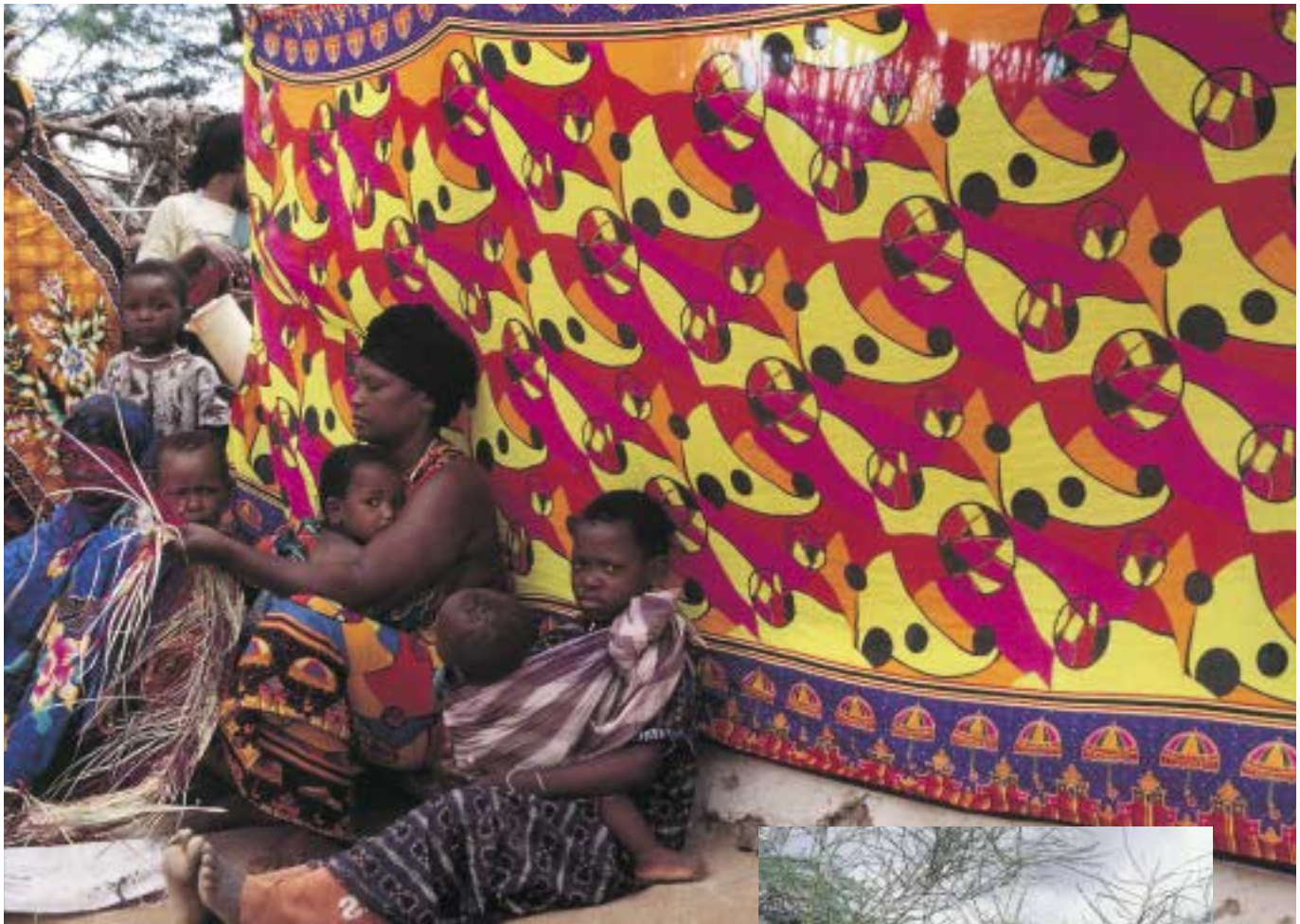
Camp life:  
preparing food.



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**Camp life:** preparing food, studying, basket weaving, a neighborly chat.



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# Searching for a solution

From the moment the *Mushungulis* arrived in Kenya, they made it clear to refugee officials they would never return to Somalia, insisting they would face continued persecution and possible death there.

UNHCR agreed. In such circumstances, the refugee agency attempts to find homes in new lands for such groups.

In the case of the Somali Bantu, it turned into an unusual and tortuous decade-long search.

The agency first turned its attention to the Bantu's ancestral home in south-eastern Africa. A Tanzania government delegation visited the refugees in 1993, confirming cultural similarities in music, dance, hunting, harvest, circumcision

and religious ceremonies with some of its own tribes. Three years later, however, Tanzania declined to accept the Bantu because the country had its own troubles.

In 1994 the East African country was swamped with hundreds of thousands of other refugees fleeing the genocide in neighboring Rwanda. The El Niño weather phenomenon was battering the country's agriculture.

The Tanzanian decision, having very little to do with the Bantu themselves, underlined the vagaries of refugee life and the sometimes thin dividing line which can separate a new beginning or

condemnation to a lifetime of exile. "We felt so helpless when we heard the result," re-



calls Abdullahi Ali Ahmed. “The Tanzanians looked like us. We felt like brothers. And then we were abandoned.”

In 1997, the refugee agency tried again, this time approaching the government of Mozambique. An official delegation spent three days in Dadaab querying the Bantu on issues such as language, their ethnic history and how the refugees mark the occasion of a girl’s maturity.

Two years later the Bantu received Mozambique’s answer. It was the same as the Tanzanians. According to an official UNHCR account, Maputo “withdrew its interest, citing the acceptance of such a large number of refugees would give the wrong political signal, especially given the unresolved, postwar circumstances of its own displaced population” following a brutal civil war in that country in the 1990s.

The report added that a positive decision would “set an unwelcome precedent that might encourage a flood of persons of Mozambican origin wishing to return from neighboring countries.”

In Africa, that is not an idle concern. In the last two centuries millions of people have been uprooted by conflict and natural disaster. Some have been assimilated, but many remain marginalized minority groups and one day may also consider trying to return to their ancestral roots.

That was little consolation for the dispirited Bantu. “We were rejected by the Tanzanians. Now by Mozambique,” Abdullahi said. “Now we felt totally adrift, homeless, without any future.”

When UNHCR next approached the U.S. government “We didn’t have much hope,” the Bantu leader said. “Our brothers had rejected us. Why should the Americans want us? What were our ties with that country?”

Washington is one of 17 countries worldwide which annually accepts agreed numbers of refugees for permanent resettlement, in addition to individuals or groups who may independently seek asylum. A major criteria for these resettlement countries is the extreme vulnerability of refugees and their inability to return safely and peacefully to their homes.

In recent years as part of this ongoing program, the United States accepted more than 3,000 so-called ‘Lost Boys’ of the Sudan (REFUGEES N° 122) and agreed to examine the case of the Somali Bantu on the same basis.

#### **HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

Despite this breakthrough, the road ahead remained uncertain and difficult.

Human trafficking has exploded into a global, multi-billion dollar business and the refugee resettlement program itself became a target when several scams were exposed in which officials were selling coveted places to the highest bidder.

Washington and UNHCR understood only too well that another high visibility project involving so many places would attract the attention of potential traffickers and untold numbers of ‘un-

qualified’ refugees.

How to decide who was really eligible for this new life on offer?

When refugees flee they rarely carry original passports or identification documents because these could compromise their already precarious safety. That problem was compounded in Somalia where few civilians had any official papers to begin with.

Once they reached Dadaab they had to begin to reconstruct not only a new life, but also a new identity. Registration lists were compiled. Ration cards became invaluable, not only to obtain food, but also to act as a ba-



UNHCR/B. PRESS/CS+VEN/2002

sic identity card. Both, of course, might be easily doctored or forged if such a valuable prize as a new life in America was at stake.

Late last year an intensive one-month long verification process was launched by UNHCR to identify who, among the tens of thousands of refugees in Dadaab, was really eligible for relocation.

When it seemed possible that Mozambique would accept the Bantu in 1997, field officers laboriously drew up three hand written lists of refugees wanting to go.

It was decided to make these original lists the starting point of the verification process for the United States, partly on the assumption that the original applicants were truly Bantu and not ‘fake’ refugees now seeking a much more attractive home in America.

A 50-strong verification team moved into Dadaab. Extra police were drafted in to keep order. The team’s first task was to sift through thousands of tattered, hand written control sheets. The original Mozambique lists, now consolidated into a master list, had to be upgraded, newly born children added, the names of the dead deleted.

In Dadaab, the targeted Bantu community was told: “Bring all of your family members and documents; be prepared to answer specific questions regarding each member of your family; don’t replace family members with others; don’t sell ration cards.” Every applicant would be individually verified.

Starting as early as 3 a.m. each morning, an estimated 1,000 persons began lining up for processing. “At least half the group waiting for transport to the verification site were clearly Somali refugees and not Bantu,” UNHCR’s Andrew Hopkins who headed the project, recalls. Around 10,000 people were subsequently ejected from the verification process at this stage.

Others insinuated themselves into the process. Bantu who had previously left Dadaab sold their ration cards to anyone willing to buy the precious documents. Families with several separate ration cards sold some of these ‘extra’ documents to Somalis. Several Bantu elders tried to manipulate the process and cash in on the bonanza.

Somalis attached family members to large Bantu groups. The Bantu would later claim they had been coerced into this action and had denounced the scam to officials at the first opportune moment. But some obviously had willingly participated.

Couples posed as husband and wife, but when questioned separately they reported having different sets of neighbors, eating different food for their last meal and other differing activities.

False claims were sometimes “so rudimentary it was not uncommon to encounter persons who could not even remember or pronounce the name of a person they were attempting to impersonate,” an official report of the exercise reported later. “Interviews often ended in

tears.” Andrew Hopkins added laconically, “These people were very poor liars.”

The process took its toll on everyone—the anxious Bantu, the excluded Somalis, and the verification team itself which became “totally exhausted.”

In the end, nearly 14,000 persons were interviewed. At the time of this article going to press some 11,585 people had been approved for submission to U.S. authorities and nearly 2,000 had been excluded after their claims were examined.

“We didn’t have much hope when this latest process began,” said Abdullahi. “But it is true and there has been lots of dancing. Oh, we have danced so much.”

Many loose ends, remained, however, with hundreds of persons still uncertain about their ultimate fate.



The Bantu have undergone years of processing.



# A tale of two peoples

**A**s the majority of refugees from Somalia fled to Kenya in the early 1990s, several thousand other Bantu were retracing the steps of their slave ancestors.

This second, smaller group escaped the war in flotillas of ships, fleeing to an area around the northeastern Tanzanian port of Tanga, the very region from which their forefathers had been shipped into bondage in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Today, the two groups of Bantu in Kenya and Tanzania are preparing for a very different future.

While nearly 12,000 Bantu who have lived in refugee camps for a decade are now looking forward to a new life in the United States, an estimated 3,300 relatives in Tanzania are following a rural lifestyle little changed for hundreds of years.

Their fortunes diverged from the moment they were uprooted by the brutal civil chaos in Somalia.

The Bantu who reached Kenya were moved into sprawling but isolated camps where they mouldered for a decade, wards of the international community but seemingly without any realistic future—twice rejected for settlement by Tanzania and Mozambique, until the American dream dramatically came along.

Shortly after, the ‘other’ group of refugees arrived in Tanzania, the government moved them to Mkuyu, a former settlement for local civil servants. The majority of the new arrivals were descendant from the Zigua tribe which still lives in the region, but there were also some non-Bantu Somali Wamahais who did not have any historical links with Tanzania.

These refugees were allowed to assimilate with the local Tanzanian population, slipping easily into an unchanging rhythm of life dominated by the annual rainy seasons, growing maize and cassava, collecting wood for the cooking stoves and herding goats.

The Somalis still speak Zigua, also spoken by the Tanzanians, as well as the coastal Swahili language. All are Moslems and share many similar cultural prac-

tices, including female circumcision and the right of men to marry up to four women.

These refugees appear ‘blissfully unaware’ of the startling change in fortune for their Kenyan relatives, but they are also looking forward to a better, albeit totally different, future.

The Tanzanian government has allocated the Bantu an area of some 5,100 acres of woodlands, rivers, streams and arable land in the Chogo region, around 80 kilometers away from their current site—at the very center of where their ancestors were seized as slaves.



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For the last two years local authorities and the U.N. refugee agency have been developing the site in a two million dollar project, building health and police centers, schools, playgrounds, shops, markets and water points for both refugees and the local population.

An advance group of farmers will begin cultivating the land in time for this year’s autumn rains and the majority of refugees will move before the end of the year, at approximately the same time the Somali Bantu in Kenya are starting their long journey to the United States.

For one group, a centuries-old cycle of displacement will have come full circle. For the second group, a fascinating new life style is just about to begin.

# Flight to freedom

**M**onday. The countdown to the Kakuma transfer has resumed at D-day minus one. The 'final, final' Dadaab checks begin again. One family is listed with nine members, but the father then announces a tenth, a niece. He refuses to travel without her. Unless the problem is solved, none of the family is likely to go. In this case, the issue is resolved when her name is found on a separate list.

One name is missing from another family. That problem, too, is resolved when it is realized one person died recently, but no one informed the officials.

Most Bantu, like the Somalis, are Moslems and men are allowed several wives, a situation which is against American law. Some of the refugees have already made 'private adjustments' to overcome this problem.

Abdi Fatah Nour's wife and child are already on the list to go to America. He is not. He was outside Dadaab when the verification process was held and his name is not on the all-important master list. He has appealed but does not know yet whether he will be allowed to go to Kakuma or have to stay in this camp.

Tying up such loose ends may take many more months of hard work, anxiety and heartbreak.

Officials from the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) will make the final deter-

mination of who is admitted in the coming months using the UNHCR list as a starting point.

But because of Dadaab's close proximity to the volatile Somali border and because of the potential for unrest among the large Somali population in Dadaab itself, this last screening will be held at the relatively safer Kakuma location.

The transfer and processing will cost more than \$5 million. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) undertook not only the refugee transfer but also oversaw the construction of 2,200 shelters of mud brick and tin roofs, each costing \$150, to house the Bantu in Kakuma. The structures are tiny, cramped and expected to be only temporary homes, but they are a major improvement compared with many other older dwellings where people have lived for years. The contrast is yet another anomaly of life in a refugee camp.

Four buses arrive to transport the majority of the Bantu to Kakuma, a bone-shaking three-day journey over rough roads. It has taken 10 years for them to reach this point, but families pack all of their worldly goods into the vehicles within 30 minutes.

Young mothers go through one last lecture—diaper training—before boarding the buses. None of the young children have ever worn these strange items before and while many of the mothers giggle through

the class, their children are clearly terrified.

Officials accompanying an earlier convoy were mystified to find the diapers totally unused at the end of the journey. Mothers, still unfamiliar with the concept, had removed the diapers to preserve their cleanliness whenever an impending 'crisis' became obvious.

Forty-four heavily pregnant women, their children, and other medical cases are being flown to Kakuma aboard an ancient propeller driven aircraft to avoid the long journey by road.

None has ever seen an aircraft close up or been a passenger on one, but their reaction is one of mild curiosity rather than apprehension. Conscious of the diaper lecture and the fact there is no toilet on board the plane, one pregnant woman asks: "What do I do if I need a toilet?" "Hold it in," suggests an accompanying nurse.

As the Andover rumbles down the dirt airstrip, women cover their faces with their headscarves, but otherwise react with aplomb. One woman cradles twins born only two weeks ago.

No one moves from their seats. One hour into the flight one woman volunteers: "The plane is making a lot of noise but why haven't we taken off yet?" Another agrees that "We are still on the ground."

None can relate to what is passing below them through the aircraft windows, that they are flying over hills, rivers and lakes.

"Oh, we must be so far high," one exclaims at last. Another is full of wonder that, "You can walk around up here, just like on the ground."

When the aircraft lands in Kakuma, young children are manhandled through the rear of the aircraft to waiting officials. The women clamber down a rickety ladder and walk jauntily toward a very different future than the life they left behind just a couple of hours earlier.

## **AMERICA, AMERICA**

"We are all illiterate, but we will learn," says 40-year-old Mohammed Yarow in discussing his future in America. What will he do there? "I will do anything," he replies. I will live wherever they put us. We will eat what you eat," he responds to further questions.

"We are very adaptable," he adds. "In a few months we will fit in to any new life. Our ancestors had to change from being Bantu to being Somali. We can do it again."

His wife is shown a picture of a kitchen cooker. She shakes her head and asks, "Who would give us something like that in Somalia?" No, she says, she has never

heard of McDonalds, pizza or Coca Cola but, "I will learn to cook the food I am given there."

Another refugee is asked about flush toilets and replies "They are only for rich people in Somalia. We will get used to them."

Perhaps like earlier immigrants, the Bantu dream similar dreams and have a very firm conviction that they will overcome any new obstacles.

Mohammed Yarow wants to become a pilot, or at least "I want my sons to become pilots." Another father has heard of a black man who is an American leader (Secretary of State Colin Powell) and of Kofi Annan and he wants his son to become Secretary-General of the United Nations.

All of the Bantu talk about security, freedom and education for their children—things they have never enjoyed before. The partly paralyzed Mussa Kumula Mohammed is delighted with the idea that there are doctors there who may be able to help his wounds.

Children are beginning to join the general excitement and when an aircraft flies high overhead, some ask, "Is that our plane for America?"

Some of the Bantu caught their first ever glimpse of snow on their journey from Dadaab to Kakuma when they espied the white capped Mount Kenya in the distance.

That may be a harbinger of the harsh winters some will face in the United States—they will only be told where they will live shortly before leaving Kenya—but the concept of snow drifts, blizzards and temperatures plunging many degrees below zero is one they still cannot fully grasp.

"It is like writing on a blank page," one refugee official says in amazement. "At this moment, America is just one big black hole for the refugees."

There are far fewer Somalis in Kakuma than Dadaab and they appear resigned rather than resentful that they have lost this latest throw of the dice for a better life. Khalif Hassan Warsame, the acting chairman of the Somali community in Kakuma says sadly, "We don't hold anything against the Bantu getting this opportunity. But we would like the same thing. We also have to look to the future, but for us there doesn't seem to be any future."

In contrast, Abdullahi Ali Ahmed sees a future he never dared think about before. "Going back to Somalia would be to plunge back into the flames," he says. "Going to America is a dream. It is the choice between the fire and paradise."



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**Undergoing** last minute diaper training.



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**Baby weighing** at Kakuma refugee camp.





**Boarding the bus for the long journey to a new life.**

# THE SOMALI BANTU



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**The first ever flight for the Somali Bantu refugees.**



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**Contemplating** a new life.