

Assistance. Dawud Mussa and Muna Ahemed solved a "misunderstanding" with police with the help of the Association of the Ethiopian Community in Fresno.

# ALL THE WAY FROM ETHIOPIA

■ Ethiopian refugees get some help in adjusting to a new land.

By Dennis Pollock  
The Fresno Bee

The refugees, about 500 of them in the city now, include 14-year-old Atif Adem, who sits on the couch in his family's Fresno home, showing his 15-month-old brother Gamal how to "do the Arsenio," right hand raised in a fist and circling, "who, who, who!"

They include the boys' mother, Muna Ahemed, dressed in traditional garb and roasting Ethiopian coffee beans over her stove in the kitchen while preparing a meal of *watt* (beef) and *injera* (bread).

They include visitors to that home, two men who are active with an agency that is helping in resettlement. One of those men has been here 16 years and says to the younger boy, "Give me five."

The other man, here only a year, has no idea what the phrase means.

The men are Ismail Umer, chairman of the board of the Association of the Ethiopian Community in Fresno; and Wolde Mahetem, the association's office manager.

Umer and Mahetem guide the asso-

ciation as it helps refugees adjust to American life, helps them with language differences, represents them in dealings with the welfare system and courts and helps them find housing and needed services. The non-profit association recently received a grant of \$16,250 through Fresno County's Department of Social Services and occupies starkly furnished offices at Romain Community Center.

"We just started weekend meetings with children, [ages] 6-12, to teach them about their country and to help them keep family values, rather than the values of the street," said Umer.

"Many of them do not even know where Ethiopia is. One 9-year-old boy, who only knew Ethiopia from American television, said, 'It is skeletons and nothing else.' We don't want them to just look at TV and see all the starving people and get discouraged."

Indeed, Ethiopia and her people have faced decades of adversity — drought, famine and civil war — that have driven hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians from the country.

A half million Ethiopians have emigrated to the United States in the past 17 years. Most live in major metropolitan centers such as Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Some wait for years after fleeing to refugee camps in Kenya, Sudan and Somalia.

In America, Mahetem said, the ad-



Russell Yip — The Fresno Bee

Helpers. Wolde Mahetem, left, and Ismail Umer help Ethiopian refugees overcome language barriers.

justment is not always easy.

He pointed out that confusion sometimes results from the fact that Ethiopians keep track of the day's hours differently, with the first hour coming at 7 a.m., instead of "counting the hours when the sun is not out."

Umer said Ethiopians are less aggressive than Americans, less likely to

talk of their academic credentials or financial standing.

"We consider it a bad thing to sell yourself," said Umer, who is a graphic artist and has been in America 16 years.

The illiteracy rate in Ethiopia approaches 90 percent, but even those

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# Ethiopia: Refugees adjust to life in a new country

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who are highly educated or who left behind professional careers have difficulty applying their skills in America.

In Ethiopia, Tefera Woldeyohannes was the equivalent of a Superior Court judge. For six years, he was a soldier in the resistance against communist rule.

Now 58 and living in Fresno, he is jobless, but has worked in this country as a gas station attendant, for the Postal Service and in transportation for a hotel.

"He is a generous man," Umer said of Woldeyohannes. "He has helped collect money for people in need."

Examples of Ethiopians in Fresno helping include collecting the money needed to bury a refugee who died shortly after arrival in the country and helping the priest of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, whose apartment was damaged by fire.

Umer cited success stories among Ethiopian newcomers: a Bullard High School student who had been here four years and who won a \$35,000 scholarship to Berkeley; an engineer for Amtrak; an owner of a car dealership.

On the wall in their office at the Romain Center is a picture of "Mother Ethiopia," a woman cradling a child. Also on the wall are posters for Ethiopian tourism proclaiming "13 months of sunshine."

Those same posters and the painting are hanging in the home of Dawud Mussa and Muna Ahemed, whose family has

been assisted by the association.

The family's story of flight from Ethiopia is not an uncommon one. Mussa walked some 300 miles to the desert floor of Sudan 18 years ago where he met his wife-to-be, Ahemed.

She had made the same journey by foot. Each had left behind family members. Her mother was killed in the fighting in Ethiopia. One of his brothers was taken prisoner by the government. One of her brothers was forced into military service.

Mussa had been a tailor and had made clothing for the resistance forces.

The couple married in Sudan and emigrated to Chicago in 1985. Most of their five children,

ranging from 15 months to 14 years, have learned to converse in three languages: the Arabic of Sudan, the Amharic of Ethiopia and the English of the United States.

They lived in Chicago for a time, but soon left behind the city's bitterly cold winters and humid summers.

The Ethiopian association came to the aid of the family by helping clear up a misunderstanding between them and police over the discipline of their oldest son, Atif, and daughter, Mserin.

"It was all a misunderstanding," said Umer. "She was spanking the children, disciplining them, and a neighbor com-

plained to the police."

Umer said Ethiopians practice strict discipline, and members of the family do not speak English well. The association intervened, he said, "to tell the police these are good people."

"We are not experienced social workers," Umer said. "But we are doing our best."

The Association of the Ethiopian Community in Fresno can be reached at 485-4605.

