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**Somali Immigrants in Ottawa: The Causes of their Migration  
and the Challenges of Resettling in Canada.**

**By**

**© Mohamoud H. Abdulle**

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# **Somali Immigrants in Ottawa: The Causes of their Migration and the Challenges of Resettling in Canada.**

**By**

**Mohamoud Abdulle**

## **Abstract**

In less than a decade, from 1988 to 1996, more than 55,000 Somali refugees had arrived in Canada of which more than 7,000 thousand resettled in Canada's capital, Ottawa. The Somali migration represents the largest black immigrant group ever to come to Canada in such a short time. The push and pull factors of this Somali refugee influx included the bloody and prolonged civil war that has plagued Somalia since 1988, the repressive policies of the military regime of late President Siad Barre (1969-1991), the colonial dismemberment of Somalia into three different parts and the economic hardships characteristic of post-colonial Africa.

Unlike many other refugee groups such as the Vietnamese, most Somalis made it to Canada on their own without the assistance of the Canadian government or other humanitarian organizations. The overwhelming majority of Somalis entered Canada as refugees under the Refugee Class of the Immigration Act.

As they began the process of resettling in Canada, Somali refugees encountered enormous difficulties in adjusting to Canada's socio-economic and political environment. Findings of this thesis indicated that Cultural, technological and linguistic differences between Somali refugees and the host society seem to have had profound impact on the integration pace of Somali refugees. This study dealt with the background factors of Somali immigrants to Canada and the challenges they faced in resettling in a country that shares little with Somalia in terms of culture, language and religion.

### **Acknowledgements.**

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## **Introduction**

Since the arrival of the charter groups (French and British) in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Canada has been the destination of immigrants from all corners of the world. Notwithstanding the fact that immigrants to Canada originated from different countries and continents, after 1867 Canada set up a filtering immigration mechanism through which only certain groups were allowed to enter the country. These groups mostly came from countries which shared linguistic and cultural backgrounds with the two charter groups. This discriminatory policy was in keeping with prevailing concepts of nationalism and cultural exclusiveness then practiced by many countries of the world.

Another pervasive Canadian myth, according to Granatsein *et al.*, is that racism and bigotry were European, or at least American, inventions that have little part in Canada's history, tradition, or psyche, and that Canada has a long history of welcoming refugees and dissidents and has always been available to proverbial huddled masses yearning to breathe free. In fact, for most of its history Canada's immigration practices have been racist and exclusionary.<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, however, the need for immigrants to settle and develop Canada grew more than the traditional sources could supply. Also shifts in political and economic orders of the world have influenced Canada's attitude towards immigrants from non-traditional sources. After the Second World War, Canada opened its immigration doors, albeit grudgingly and gradually, a little wider to allow in immigrants and refugees from non-traditional countries. It signed a convention for refugees in 1969 by which terms it agreed to undertake humanitarian obligations to protect refugees and other individuals in similar situations. The changes in immigration policies were accompanied by changes in the Canadian public perception of immigrants and their

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<sup>1</sup> Ninnette Kelley and Michael Trebilock, The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Inc., 1998), 212.

role in Canadian society. In 1967 changes were made to the *Immigration Act* which removed the racially and geographically discriminatory features of the Act<sup>2</sup>.

Just as the earlier immigration policies discriminated against people from non-traditional countries, Canadian historians favored the writing of charter group histories rather than the histories of other ethnic groups in Canada. The writing of ethnic histories had to wait until changes were made in immigration policies. Since Confederation, the writing of immigration and ethnic history in Canada has gone through a number of stages. It was only after the report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in 1970 recommended the writing of the histories of ethnic and cultural groups in Canada and their contributions to the Canadian society that the academic community gave a serious look at the stories of ethnic groups in Canada.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1970s, the stories of many different ethnic groups in Canada have received considerable attention from academics. This contributes to the understanding of Canadian society and its history.

The Somalis are a community of recent immigrants to Canada and their migration presents a unique case because it happened so quickly and so unexpectedly. Neither Somalis nor Canadians anticipated such a migration because Canada was not a traditional destination for immigrants from Somalia. Unlike the immigration pattern of other groups, most Somali refugees came to Canada without the knowledge or participation of the Canadian government or non-governmental organizations. Their migration to Canada took place on the basis of personal endeavors rather than an organized movement of people.

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<sup>2</sup> Gerald E. Dirks, *Canada's Refugee Policy: Indifference or Opportunism?* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977), 230.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony W. Rasporich, "Ethnicity in Canadian Historical Writing 1970-1990" in *Ethnicity and Culture in Canada*, edited by J.W. Berry and J.A. Laponce (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 153.

This thesis will look at the reasons why and how within eight years tens of thousands of Somali refugees/immigrants came to Canada<sup>4</sup> and why prior to this avalanche, there were no Somalis in Canada. It will explore background factors, external and internal, that produced a situation which led to the dispersal of Somalis in many countries, and how these Somali refugees were able to reach Canada despite the huge distance and lack of historical links between Somalia and Canada. It will also attempt to examine how Canadian immigration and refugee policies, in place at the time of Somali refugees' arrival, played a part or contributed to this influx.

Although Somalis came to Canada at different times and for different reasons, they represent the largest group of black immigrants to come to Canada in such a short time. The causes of their migration can be attributed to several factors including the geopolitical division of the world into socialist and capitalist camps, the colonial legacy and a dictatorial regime. A chronological account of different waves of Somali refugees will also be provided. Finally, this thesis will discuss the prospect of Somali integration into Canadian society and how Somalis are coping with the difficulties of resettling in a country that is fundamentally different from where they came in terms of culture, religion and social structure. This thesis will also attempt to explore Canada's public reaction to the influx of Somali refugees and the reception accorded them. Special attention will be given to the relationship between public reaction to the Somali refugee influx, as represented by Canadian media coverage, and how Canada Immigration responded to this public reaction as reflected by prompt changes in immigration and refugee policies.

...debate over the scope and composition of Canada's refugee policies attracted national and international attention. It was characterized by sharp division of opinion between those who believe that a country's refugee policy was "the litmus test of the concept of justice in a society" and those who were primarily concerned "with contro-

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada, *1996 Population Census*, Population Statistics Section, Nation's Series C.D. Rom, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Catalogue no. 93, f0020XCB-96-004, (Ottawa, September, 1998).

lling the destabilizing forces of an influx of refugees....guiding and managing the process”<sup>5</sup>

As part of this thesis I conducted a survey and oral interviews which were designed to provide information from a sample of Somali refugees/immigrants in Ottawa. The survey consisted of two components: a self-administered questionnaire and semi-structured oral interviews with some Somali community members. The questionnaire was designed to elicit responses from respondents about a number of issues related to their migration and settlement in Canada. It was composed of two parts: (A) Demographic information: respondents were asked to provide background information such as age, marital status, length of residence in Canada, immigration status, number of children, level of education, employment history, English language proficiency and so on. (B) Settlement and Integration: the second set of questions dealt with the respondents’ perceptions/understanding regarding their experience in Canada as refugees/immigrants and what difficulties they encountered during the resettlement process. 120 respondents (out of 200) answered the questionnaire satisfactorily. A team of six trained volunteers assisted me in the distribution of the survey questionnaire and in some cases its translation from English to Somali for those participants who expressed a preference for having the questions translated into Somali. Copies of the questionnaire were made available for participants at three Somali community centres with two volunteers at each location to help distribute the questionnaire and to assist those who needed translation. An equal number of females and males was chosen to ensure gender representation of the sample. The respondents were representative of the Somali refugee/immigrant community in Ottawa and matched the community profile in terms of their migration to Canada and their gender and age composition.

The oral interviews involved nine Somali community members in Ottawa. Six of them were

selected on the basis of their lack of literacy. Given the fact that a portion of the Somali refugees/immigrants in Ottawa could not write or read, it was necessary to conduct oral interviews with some members of this group. The remaining three interviewees were selected for their participation and leadership role in the Somali community in Ottawa-Carleton. All nine respondents had to answer the same open-ended questions on issues pertaining to the problems encountered by Somalis in the process of settlement and integration in Canada.

The purpose of the survey was to provide information to assist in understanding how the Somali refugees/immigrants perceived their Canadian experience and what coping mechanisms they utilized in dealing with the difficulties of adjusting to their adopted society. The findings of the survey have been incorporated into the discussion of this study. However, the reliability of the survey results may be undermined by two factors: first, most of the people who answered the questionnaire had a good command of the English language and, therefore, did not match the community profile in terms of education and literacy. This means that the views of those who could not speak English were not well represented in the findings of the survey. Secondly, questionnaire brochures were only available at community centres and survey participants had to come to these centres to get them. Again, those who had connections with the community or used its services, made up the majority of the participants in the survey.

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<sup>5</sup> Donald H. Avery, *Reluctant Host: Canada's Response to Immigrant Workers, 1896-1994*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1994), 220.

## **Chapter 1.**

### **History and Geography of Somalia:**

Somalia is located on the easternmost tip of Africa, better known as the Horn of Africa, which is where the continent juts out to meet the Arabian Peninsula. This is a vast region of varied terrain and vegetation, mainly savannah and semi-desert, with sparse annual rainfall of about 280 mm. A system of mountains and hills provides prominent features, particularly in the north, which include the Golis mountain range and the Nugal Valley and two main rivers in the south, the Shabelle and Jubba, which originate from the mountainous eastern highlands of Ethiopia. Somalia shares a border with Ethiopia in the west, Kenya in the South and Djibouti in the Northwest. It has the longest coastline in Africa, except for South Africa, running from Ras Asair on the Red Sea coast in the north to Raskamboni on the Indian Ocean near the Kenyan border in the south. Most of the Somali speaking peoples occupy the eastern Horn of Africa, which runs from the east side of the Ethiopian Rift Valley to the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden, and is a vast region of different climate , soils and terrain.

Somali belongs to the Afro-Asiatic family of languages. Within this family, Somali is a member of the Cushitic subfamily which includes Oromo, Saho and Afar (all in Ethiopia). The Somali population is estimated to be between eight and ten million, and forms one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa. Unlike many other African peoples, Somalis share a single language, culture, and religion. Somalia is almost unique among the states of modern Africa. Instead of a patchwork of ethnic and tribal groups inside an arbitrary colonial frontier, it contains only one people: the Somalis.<sup>6</sup> The origin of the Somali people is not well documented, partly because the Somali language was not written before 1972 and, therefore, the Somalis, who were

predominantly nomads, were illiterate and relied on oral history and literature as tools for transmitting their culture and heritage to successive generations.

The origin of the Somali people is still a matter of scholarly dispute. According to one school (Arabists), the Somalis are the offspring of Arab immigrants and native inhabitants of the Horn of Africa.<sup>7</sup> As the Arabs migrated to the Horn of Africa and increased in number, the Arabists maintain, they mingled and intermarried with the indigenous peoples of the region, expanding throughout the area. Arabists pointed to the light skin of Somalis as proof of their theory. The Somalis, like most of the peoples of this region, are racially of the intermediate type which was once called Hamitic; dark-skinned, but more similar in cast of face to Arabs and Europeans than to Negroes. They probably originated as a separate people near the Gulf of Aden coast, in the northern part of their present territory.<sup>8</sup>

Another school (Africanists) rejects the assertions of the Arabists with regard to the origin of Somalis. The Africanists dismiss the Arabist theory as nothing more than the desire of Muslim Somalis to identify themselves with the people of the Prophet. Linguistic and archaeological evidence, they contend, put the origin of Somalis in the southern highlands of Ethiopia. The point of origin of speakers of eastern Cushitic languages, of which Somali is one and Oromo is another, lay in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya.<sup>9</sup>

Wherever they might come from, the Somalis occupied much of the Horn of Africa by 500 A.D. During Medieval times, the Horn of Africa (Somali, Ethiopia, and Djibouti) had trade contacts with North Africa (primarily with Egypt) and the Arabian Peninsula. It was these trade

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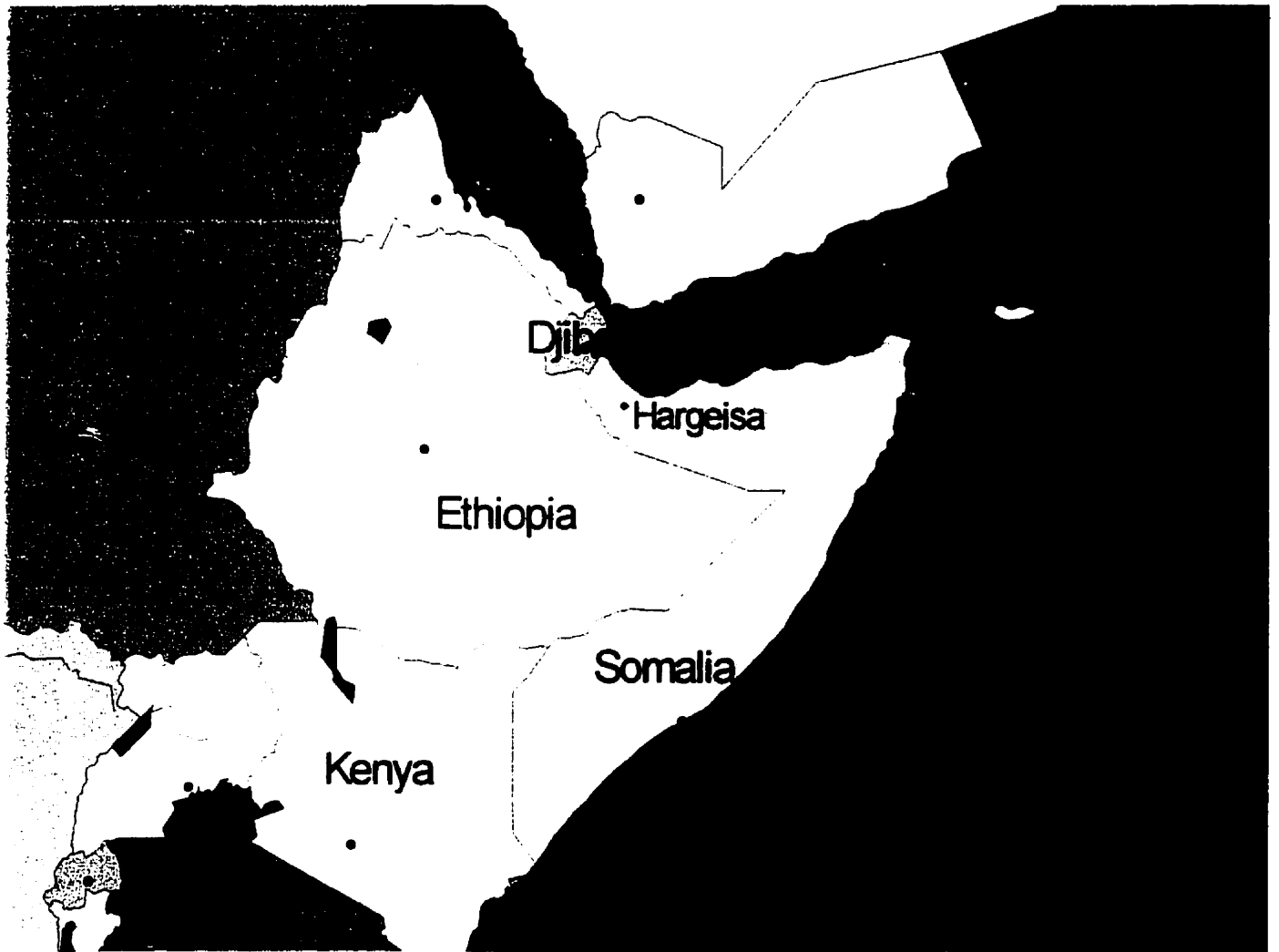
<sup>6</sup> John Middleton, *The Peoples of Africa*, (London: Marshall Cavendish Press, 1978), 62.

<sup>7</sup> Ali Abdirahman Hersi, "The Arab Factor in Somali History: the Origin and Development of Arab Enterprise and Cultural Influences in the Somali Peninsula", Ph.D. diss., (University of California, Los Angeles, 1977), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Middleton, *The Peoples of Africa*, 162.

<sup>9</sup> Mohamed Nuuh Ali, "The History in the Horn of Africa, 1000 B.C.-Rift Valley and Indian Ocean," Ph.D. diss., (University of California, Los Angeles, 1985 ), 7.

# Somalia and Its Neighbours



Source: ArcView 1998



links between the Horn region of Africa and the Middle East that served as a vehicle to spread both Christianity and Islam to the region. Slaves and ivory were the two most important items of this trade for many years. Taking advantage of this relationship, early Coptic Christian missionaries were able to spread Christianity to the small Ethiopian Kingdom of Aksum on the Red Sea coast, first to the coastal towns and then to the interior. In the same way, in the seventh century A.D., Islam was introduced to Somalia by Arab merchants, some of whom established their own petty kingdoms along the Red Sea and Indian Ocean coasts. "They were not only merchants; they were also preachers who were selling their products as well as their religion to the indigenous people."<sup>10</sup> Christians and Muslims had fought for centuries for control of the trade routes across the Red Sea and Indian Ocean which link the region to the Arabian peninsula and the Far East. This religious conflict prevented the peaceful coexistence of Christian Ethiopians and Muslim Somalis up to the present day. Furthermore, the European colonial powers, in their scramble for African colonies during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, took advantage of this religious divide between Somalia and Ethiopia to establish their colonial authorities in those African countries. It was a locally produced situation which enabled them to carry out their policy of divide and conquer.

Traditionally, the Somalis were agriculturalists. An estimated two thirds of the population still practices livestock rearing as its main economic occupation. Camels, goats, cattle, and sheep are among animals valued in Somalia. Over 25 percent of Somalis are farmers, mainly in the south, who grow maize, millet, bananas, grapefruit and other crops.

Somalia is a classic example of African partition by European colonial powers during the nineteenth century. Between 1885 and 1898, as the European scramble for Africa grew in

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<sup>10</sup>Hersi, "The Arab Factor in Somali History", 35.

momentum, Somalia was divided among three powers. The colonisation of Somali territories and partition into British, Italian, and French zones was both competitive and collaborative and continued up to the 1940s. Britain took control of northern Somalia with the aim of securing the Red Sea against the French. The initial objective of the British in establishing their authority in northern Somalia was military. With the French closing in from the west, it was too dangerous for the British navy in Aden to leave northern Somalia open to French occupation because it served as a supply point for British forces in the middle East and the Indian Ocean.

Italy, which joined the scramble for African colonies belatedly, acquired southern Somalia in 1889 with the help of the British who preferred Italian colonisation to French. Immediately after establishing its authority in southern Somalia, Italy set up banana plantations, with Somali slave labour, along the Shabelle and Jubba rivers. Unlike the British, the Italians intended to settle in Somalia and brought their political and social institutions with them. Shortly after their conquest of southern Somalia, Italians began to build schools, churches, and a police network. Economic exploitation and empire building were Italy's motives in capturing Somalia in 1880s. After the end of the Second World War, Italy was chosen by the UN to administer Somalia as a trust territory for ten years. It had a greater impact on Somalia, in terms of culture and language, than other European colonisers (the British and French).<sup>11</sup>

The French carved out the port city of Djibouti on the Red Sea coast between British Somali land and Ethiopia for the same purposes as the British. As in many of its colonies in Africa, France adopted a policy of cultural assimilation in French Somaliland. The French considered their overseas colonies as part of their nation, and vigorously tried to transplant their political,

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<sup>11</sup> Said Samatar and David Leitin, Somalia: A Nation in Search of a State, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 56.

cultural, and religious values to these colonies.<sup>12</sup> French Somaliland became an independent Republic in 1977, the Republic of Djibouti. It is also worth mentioning that Ethiopia, one of the two African countries which escaped European colonialism, participated in the partition of Somalia. In 1889, Emperor Mellenik of Ethiopia struck a deal with the British by which Ethiopia agreed to remain neutral to the European offers or competition for colonies in the Horn region. In return, it received a huge portion of land in western Somalia. After the end of the war, the British also rewarded Kenya with some of the spoils of the Italian colonies, including a large area in southern Somalia, then known as NFD (Northern Frontier District).

In 1960, after becoming independent, northern Somalia (British Somaliland) and southern Somalia (Italian Somaliland) merged and formed the Somali Republic. The colonial legacy, the division of Somalia into four parts, determined the political course that Somalia took after independence. The political agenda of successive Somali governments since independence was dominated by the struggle to undo what the European colonial powers had done to Somalia. As far as Somali governments and people are concerned, their independence is not complete until all territories lost to Ethiopia and Kenya are regained and united under the Somali flag.<sup>13</sup> This territorial dispute between Somalia and Ethiopia created tension between the two countries. In an attempt to reclaim the Ogaden region, Somalia launched an attack against Ethiopia in 1977 and was defeated after the former Soviet Union and Cuba entered the war on Ethiopia's side.

In order to understand the integration problems faced by the Somali refugees in Canada, it is necessary to place them into their spatial and temporal context prior to their arrival in Canada. As mentioned above, the Somalis are largely a homogenous society united by a common language, religion and culture. There are, however, a few minority groups of Asian, Arab and

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

Bantu origins in southern Somalia along the Jubba and Shabelle rivers and coastal cities. But these groups are numerically so small that they cannot alter the homogenous nature of Somali society and are largely found in cities and towns rather in rural or nomadic areas.

Somali society organizes itself along clan lines. There are four large clan families: The Darood, Hawiye, Dir, and Isaq. Each clan family branches out into several descendant clans, sub-clans and lineage segments. This Clan system is held together by patrilineal kinship ties. Descent is traced through the male line. The Somalis have a complex genealogical system and can trace their descent back to thirty or forty ancestors. In addition to the four major clan families, there are a number of minority groups outside this clan system. As well as representing the past history of a group or clan's ancestors, Somali genealogy determines the political loyalty of the group or clan. It sets the political parameters within which an individual can participate in political activities.

The clan system dominates the social and political life of the Somali people. In the Somali context, a clan is a group of large families tracing themselves to a common ancestor, they bear his name, and are bound to mutual aid in peace and war. It is the most important political institution through which individuals express their political views. Loyalty is devoted to one's lineage, sub-clan and clan respectively. For all practical purposes, kinship regulates and controls individuals' lives. As a social group, the clan lives in a particular geographic area, although most regions in Somalia are inhabited by multi-clan groups. It provides the individual's primary group identity and commands his/her political loyalty. The successive Somali governments since independence have failed to produce a cadre of elites whose political loyalty transcends that of clan loyalty. This clan domination of Somalia's political affairs contributed to the prolongation of the destructive civil war raging in Somalia for the last 10 years. To understand Somali society,

one must understand its clan structure. The Somali owes stronger allegiance to his/her clan and lineage than to any other higher or larger institution, including the state. Political power in Somalia is perceived in terms of one's clan affiliation rather than one's ideological conviction or even office title.<sup>14</sup>

Those who belong to large clans exercise political power by virtue of their membership in a certain clan. In the absence of a power sharing mechanism among the various clans, and given the traditional feuds among these clans, the factions representing them have failed to settle their differences in their attempts to form a national government.<sup>15</sup> Somali genealogy is not only a family tree conserving the historical origins of a group; in the sphere of politics its significance lies in the fact that it represents the political affiliations of individuals and groups. By reference to his ancestors a man's relations with others are defined or at least circumscribed<sup>16</sup>

The root causes of the present crisis in Somalia can be partially attributed to the segmentary nature of the clan system. In an attempt to explain Somalia's traditional social and political character, I.M. Lewis had this to say:

The first thing to underscore about Somalis is that they are not like other men. Richard Burton, the famous Arabist and explorer who trekked across their lands in 1880s called the Islamic Somali nomads a "fierce and turbulent race of republics". An Ugandan Sergeant with the British forces fighting the "Mad Mullah" went on record as telling his officer: "Somalis, Bwana, they no good, each man his own Sultan." In other words, they take orders from nobody, and their sense of independence is matched by supremely uncentralized and fragmented degree of political organization, a kind of orderly anarchy. The basis of political allegiance is blood kinship genealogy. Children learn their ancestors' names by heart back to twenty generations or more. A Somali does not ask another where he is from but whom he from. Strangers who meet recite their genealogies until they reach a mutual ancestor- the more closely they are related, the more readily they unite, transiently against others. "Myself against my brother; my brother and I against my cousin; my cousin and I against outsiders."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Abdalla Omar Mansur, "Contrary to a Nation: the Cancer of the Somali State" in *The Invention of Somalia*, ed. by Ali Jimale (Lawrenceville; NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995), 107.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>16</sup> . I.M Lewis, *Blood and Bone: The call of Kinship in Somali Society*, (Larenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, (1994), 81.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

In nomadic settings there is strict division of labour between men and women. Traditional patterns in Somali culture place restrictions on the behavior of females. This differential expectation of the roles of woman and man dictates where each belongs in society. Women's role is supposed to be domestic while men are expected to be bread-winners. Women's tasks in the nomadic areas include weaving the portable nomadic houses, fetching water, caring for small animals ( e.g. calves and goats), making household utensils, and caring for the sons and daughters. In Somali nomadic culture, a family without a man as the head of the household is inconceivable.<sup>18</sup>

In farming areas women play an even greater role in contributing to the family economy. They constitute more than seventy percent of the rural work force. Women are engaged in the food chain for subsistence, from sowing to marketing grain and from the rearing of livestock to selling milk products, eggs and meat.<sup>19</sup> However, boys and girls go to the same schools, although boys get more educational opportunity than girls. In rural areas women's responsibilities include tending goats and sheep, whereas men look after camels, the most valued animal in Somalia. In agricultural communities women participate in activities which are undertaken by men in nomadic areas. Such activities as farming, harvesting crops and planting seeds during the farming seasons are mainly carried out by women. In addition, women have to care for the children and the elderly. Gender inequality in Somalia, like many other societies in Africa, is embedded in the cultural and religious foundation of society. In the sphere of economics, women exercise greater power than in other areas such as politics. In most cases a Somali woman is responsible, for example, for household expenditure, savings, and running the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>19</sup> UNICEF, "The Role of Somali Women in Food Production" A Report on the Status of Somali Women, ( New York , April 1993), 78.

daily expenses of the family.

Most Somali marriages are arranged, but with the opinion of the partners seriously considered. Arranged marriages are based on the belief that the critical issue of choosing a life partner should be handled by responsible members of the family and kin group. In this respect, marriage is considered to be establishing a lasting relationship between two different families or clans rather than a romantic affair between two individuals. Marriages are guided by religious and cultural prescriptions and proscriptions. Islam permits conditional polygamy, but most Muslims practice monogamy. Premarital acquaintance is not necessary in cases of arranged marriages. In general, to verbalize and manifest romantic expressions are looked upon as immoral and indecent. In Somalia it is customary that the boy's party initiates the marriage proposal and pays a dowry to the girl's party.<sup>20</sup> Love is viewed as a temporary emotional manifestation that would fade away as the social and economic realities set in and it should not be the only basis for marriage.

During the socialist regime of General Mohamed Siad Barre (1969-1991), women's status improved in terms of their participation in the political and economic affairs of the country. They joined the armed forces, were public service employees and formed their own women's organization. Siad Barre had appointed two female ambassadors and included several female ministers in his cabinet. His critics say that he did not do this out of conviction for women's equality but acted from political expediency to rally women to his side. Regardless of the regime's intentions, Somali women achieved greater political and social rights under Siad Barre's

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<sup>20</sup> Samatar and Leitin, Somalia: A Nation in Search of a State, 39.

government than under any other Somali regime.<sup>21</sup>

Economic characteristics of Somali refugees prior to their arrival in Canada reflected their socio-economic conditions in Somalia. In general, refugees can be divided into three main groups based on what part of the country they came from: urban refugees; those from farming areas; and those who came from nomadic or rural areas. The percentage of each group in the overall number of Somali refugees in Ottawa is indicated in the table on page 18.

**Urban refugees:** According to responses given by participants in my survey, the majority of Somali refugees in Ottawa, about 70%, were urban residents who lived in major cities such as Mogadishu, the capital, Hargeisa, the second largest city, Kismayo, Baydhabo, Burao, Gaalkayo, Marka and other Somali cities. They came from different segments of urban society including women and children, public employees, business people, unemployed, students, professionals, military personnel and politicians. A distinctive feature of this group is their high level of education relative to the other two groups. The socialist economic system in Somalia, from 1969 to 1991, did not encourage much private sector development. As a result, the government was the biggest employer in the country. Given the rudimentary level of technological development in Somalia, most of these public employees worked in the service sector. However, there was a small, but significant, business sector that employed a large number of people.

Like many other third world countries, Somali cities were the destination of rural migrants who lacked the education and skills necessary to get jobs in cities. Effects of urbanization were felt in large cities as many rural people migrated to urban centers seeking a better standard of living. Some refugees, who had been in cities or towns at the time of the civil war, might have

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<sup>21</sup> Christine Choi Ahmed, "Finely Etched Chattel: The Invention of a Somali Woman," in The Invention of Somalia, ed. by Ali Jimale, (Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press Inc., 1995), 161.



recently migrated to urban areas from the nomadic or remote villages in the countryside. Some respondents who reported to have come from urban areas might have lived there for a short time.

**Refugees from farming areas:** The second group of Somali refugees, about 25%, hailed from the inter-riverine area of southern Somalia where cultivation of crops is the principal source of livelihood. People in this part of Somalia depend on subsistence farming with some livestock rearing, mainly cattle and camels. Among the major crops grown in this area are maize, sorghum, millet, sesame, and fruits such as bananas, grapefruit, and watermelon. The main occupations in farming areas are: land clearing, planting, weeding, irrigation, bird scaring, harvesting, threshing and marketing of farm products. The most prevalent form of crop cultivation in Somalia is rain-fed farming. Few farmers adopted modern agricultural technologies such as tractors, irrigation pumps, fertilizers, weed control or pesticide; the majority of farmers use labor intensive traditional methods to cultivate their fields. Some farmers also use animal traction for plowing their fields. A typical farmer would own about ten to thirty acres of land of which half is usually laid fallow at any time to avoid depleting soil fertility. Usually people in these occupations learn their skills through traditional methods of apprenticeship. Children accompany their parents to the fields and help them while they also learn different skills from this experience.

Literacy among farmers is very low since the demand for farm labor is very high in agricultural areas and school-age children have to help their parents in cultivating the fields. In addition to growing a variety of crops, some farmers keep a mixture of livestock such as cattle, sheep, goats and camels. This is important as a survival strategy given the unreliability of rain in Somalia. Farmers who keep livestock have the option of moving away from drought affected areas to other places in the event of failed crops. They can also turn to their animals for food.

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The near self-sufficient agricultural economy does not provide much attraction for many businesses. Small retail shops sell such items as clothing, spare parts for trucks and others. Refugees from this part of Somalia and those from nomadic areas were not likely to have any technical skills or knowledge of Canada's official languages and suffered more from language barriers and cultural shock than refugees from urban areas.

Some Somalis had education in Somalia and learned languages... I have never been to school before... I grew up in a nomadic area and never had an opportunity to go to school. But other people did... they could speak English, French ... and could find their way in Canada without asking for translation every time they want to talk to the Canadians..... it is easy for them, not for me... <sup>22</sup>

**Refugees from nomadic areas:** The remaining 5% of Somali refugees in Ottawa reported that they came from nomadic parts of Somalia. The economic life there is based on livestock rearing where social organization reflects the economic activities practiced in the area. Ideally, a nomadic family possesses a herd of sheep, goat and/or camels. Women in these families are responsible for grazing sheep and goats, for looking after the children and managing household affairs. Men are supposed to graze camels, drive them to water holes and deal with political matters of the group or clan. Frequent mobility is another feature in nomadic areas. Due to the scarcity of rain, nomads always move from one area to another in search of pasture for their animals even if they have to cross borders. Permanent settlement is not possible in these areas because overgrazing creates a condition of scarcity in terms of available pasture for animals, forcing nomads to move constantly in search of water and pasture for their animals. Education in this area follows the traditional system of passing one's skills to one's children. There are few formal schools, mostly primary, in nomadic areas. The livestock sector represents more than 80% of Somalia's exports and also supports 60% of the nomadic population in the countryside.

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<sup>22</sup> Halima Guleed, Somali refugee in Ottawa, Interview by author, Ottawa, July 10, 1999.

Farm exports include bananas, grapefruit and watermelons. Maze, millet, sorghum, cassava, sugarcane and sesame are among the principal crops grown in these agricultural areas.

Frankincense and myrrh are also major Somali exports. Somalia exports goats, sheep and camel mainly to the Middle East, particularly to Saudi Arabia and Yemen. At this point, there is no literature, to our knowledge, on the occupational composition of Somali refugees in Ottawa prior to their migration to Canada. They came from all walks of life, and from all areas of Somalia.

Unlike many other civil wars throughout the world, there is no part of Somalia that has not been affected by the civil war.

Table 1:

1. In Somalia, did you live in A) a city/town ? B) a rural farming community?  
C) a rural nomadic community?

<b>Area of residence in Somalia</b>	<b>% in Ottawa</b>	<b># Participated in the survey</b>
Cities and towns	70%	84
Rural farming areas	25%	30
Rural nomadic areas	5%	6
Total	100%	120

Source: Survey questionnaire responses conducted by the author, Ottawa, May 1998.

A number of reasons account for the fact that there were more Somali refugees from urban areas than from the countryside. One reason is that the civil war was more intensive in cities than the rural areas, and as a result, people who were living in cities and towns had to flee to safer places in neighboring countries. However, people in nomadic areas had the flexibility of moving with their animals to safer places within the country and could also live off their animals for food. Urban dwellers did not have this flexibility and once they were displaced by the war, had

to seek food to survive. Another reason was the ability of townspeople to travel long distances by trucks, buses or boats and reach other countries, while those in rural areas could travel only on foot. Only those nomads who lived in places near the borders were able to cross to safety. For many of them, the journey to cross to Kenya or to Ethiopia was more dangerous than taking a chance in the war zone. All refugees from cities and towns were not able, however, to find sanctuary in neighboring countries. Many Somalis, for instance, who were in the capital, Mogadishu, at the time of the war, had gone back to the traditional regions of their clan or parts of the country where they could be protected by kinsmen.

## **Chapter 2.**

### **Canadian Immigration and Refugee Policy:**

Historically, Canadian immigration policy strongly discouraged migration of non-whites to Canada. Until 1967, Canada maintained a racist immigration policy which divided the world into preferred and non-preferred countries with preferential treatment given to those immigrants from preferred sources, mainly Northern Europe and the United States of America, who were needed to populate Canada's empty huge land-mass. The Canadian government pursued an aggressive immigration policy whereby free land was offered to immigrants from Europe, particularly to those from Northern Europe.<sup>23</sup> Between 1896 and 1914 Canadian immigration policy served, above all else, the dictates of the capitalist labour market. Prior to 1914 immigrants from other parts of the world other than Northern Europe could enter Canada on the basis of labour demands of the Canadian economy. Under the banner of economic growth thousands of immigrant workers were encouraged to enter the country to meet the labour needs of commercial agriculture, railroad construction, lumbering, mining, and other labour-intensive industries.<sup>24</sup>

Following the outbreak of WW I and WW II in Europe, however, political considerations outweighed economic interests when making decisions as to who should enter Canada. Immigrants from countries which were considered as "enemy" countries were refused entry into Canada. National security considerations had a powerful impact on Canada's refugee policies during the Second World War and the early stages of the Cold War.<sup>25</sup> This was in addition to the already discriminatory Immigration Policy that divided the world into desirable and non-

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<sup>23</sup> Leo Driedger, *Multi-ethnic Canada: Identities and Inequalities*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996), 55.

<sup>24</sup> Donald H. Avery, *Reluctant Host: Canada's Response to Immigrant Workers, 1896-1994*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1994), 41.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

desirable categories. Some new countries were added to the non-desirable category because of the war

Canada's stature in the twentieth century as a prosperous member of the international state system with a developed economy and a skilled labour force is largely attributable to immigration. Regardless of this, many Canadians of every era have expressed doubts about the customs and characteristics of newcomers in their midst.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the fact that Canada for many years maintained a racist immigration policy, it has a history of providing assistance to refugees and other people fleeing from persecution in their countries. During the American Civil War, many non-conformist religious groups decided to leave for British North America escaping from the political uncertainty in the United States and seeking freedom from intolerance and persecution. After Confederation, Canada accepted many refugees fleeing from persecution, including such groups as the Mennonites, Doukhobors, Quakers and Mormons<sup>27</sup>.

In the aftermath of WWII, refugees and displaced people from Eastern Europe and Germany were scattered in different countries. Canada accepted thousands of these eastern European refugees and displaced persons for resettlement in the postwar years. Aside from its humanitarian obligations, Canada had to share the burden of refugees and displaced persons from war-torn Europe with its allies. As a major military power, ranking third among the Western Allies in war production and a founding member of the United Nations, Canada was, whether its people liked it or not, a player on the stage of world affairs. And in 1945 this meant, among other things, that the country was expected by its allies and indeed by many of its own people to respond positively to the immense problem of European refugees and displaced persons.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Gerald E. Dirks, *Controversy and Complexity: Canadian Immigration Policy during the 1980s*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 9.

It is noteworthy, however, that Canada's humanitarian and political obligations, after WWII coincided with its economic interests. When the economic conditions remained buoyant after the war and beneficial effects of the federal social security system had begun to be felt, Canadians became even more disposed to meet their humanitarian and international obligations. The familiar voice of the industrialists and the transportation companies exalting the advantages of a large-scale influx of immigrant workers was also heard. The result was that from 1946 to 1952 over 100,000 DP workers came to Canada.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, during the early years of the Cold War, when the tension between Western and Eastern blocs ran high, Canada also provided a haven to refugees from different eastern European countries including Hungarians and Czechoslovakians. Also in the 1970s, Canada received Vietnamese, Tibetans, Chileans and Indochinese refugees whose countries were undergoing political upheavals.<sup>30</sup> As an actor in international affairs, Canada's international political goals and its economic and humanitarian imperatives necessitated changes to its restrictive immigration policy and in 1967 a new immigration Act was introduced.

The new Immigration Act of 1967 was partially a response to Canada's increasing need for skilled and professional immigrants, a need that arose out of a change in the Canadian economy from a primary sector-based economy to a technology-driven economy. Moreover, Canada was suffering (and still suffers) from a serious brain drain to the United States of America and accepts large number of immigrants to compensate for the lost talents. Representatives of the extractive industries and agricultural organizations as well as the Canadian Manufacturer's Association (CMA) wanted a higher ratio of skilled workers, while organized labour was

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<sup>27</sup> Jean Burnet and Howard Palmer, *Coming Canadians: An Introduction to a History of Canada's Peoples*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988), 31.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

adamantly opposed to any plan to recruit skilled workers. The CMA, however, had one trump card: the need to replace the thousands of Canadian-born skilled workers who sought better jobs in the United States.<sup>31</sup>

In general, Canada's immigration policy has always been a balance between the long term goals of immigration, which focus on the demographic impacts of immigration such as population growth, and short term needs and pressures that may be created by the political and economic climate of the country. While the long term goals form a permanent feature of immigration policy, short term goals are dictated by the political and economic situation of the country. During periods of rising unemployment, Immigration Canada comes under pressure from labor groups to restrict immigration inflows. However, when there is need for skilled or unskilled labor, it may be required to bring in more immigrants. For example, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the government had to resort to the assistance of railway companies to recruit farmers from eastern and southern Europe for settlement in the vast tracts of the Canadian West. This policy of inducing immigrants to settle in western Canada was part of a set of policies aimed at establishing national development strategies.

The pressure for the recruitment of "industrial immigrant navvies mounted after 1907 when the Canadian Pacific, Grand Trunk Pacific, and Canadian Northern were all engaged in immense construction projects. During the next seven years between 50,000 and 70,000 railroad workers were engaged annually in completing the two new transcontinental railways, in double-tracking the CPR main line, and in building numerous colonization lines. In their insatiable demand for cheap unskilled labour all three companies pressured the Immigration Branch to facilitate the entry of immigrant navvies "irrespective of nationality"... most popular immigrant workers were "non-preferred" southern European immigrants.<sup>32</sup>

In order to have the legal leverage to reconcile these differing interests, the government has

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<sup>30</sup> Dirks, *Controversy and Complexity*, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Avery, *Reluctant Host*, 234.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.



built into the Immigration Act enough flexibility to make necessary changes without having to seek public approval. Three elements of immigration policy stand out. The first is the flexibility built into the Immigration Act. This is accomplished by defining the Act in very broad terms and in the process assigning extensive powers of control over admissions to the cabinet to be implemented through specific Orders-in-Council. The latter do not need to be brought before the House for debate, and hence for public review<sup>33</sup>

Another element of Canadian Immigration Policy was the concept of “absorptive capacity” which emerged in the 1920s. Absorptive capacity refers to the ability of the economy to provide employment to immigrants at the prevailing nominal wage. This is where the conflict between short term and long goals of immigration policy is most apparent. Advocates of this concept emphasize the need to ensure that the economy is able to absorb additional immigrants before they are allowed into Canada. The absorptive capacity of a region or a territory could be determined, it was claimed, by measuring the availability of natural and human resources, the capital necessary to carry out development of those still untapped resources, the population change through natural increase and existing rates of immigration and emigration, and generally, the ability of the economy to supply employment opportunities.”<sup>34</sup>

Throughout its evolution, Canada’s immigration policy was guided by national and economic principles which set the parameters within which policy issues could be discussed. Special interest groups such as ethnic groups and certain employers or industries also influenced immigration policy.

People of black African ancestry fell into the non-preferred category of immigrants and

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<sup>33</sup> A.G. Green and D.A. Green, “Canadian Immigration Policy: The Effectiveness of the Point System and other Instruments,” *Canadian Journal of Economics*, (November, 1995) 1006-41.

<sup>34</sup> Gerald . Dirks, *Canada’s Refugee Policy: Indifference or Opportunism?* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1977), 126.

Canadian Immigration Policy discouraged their migration to Canada. Until after Canada gave up its discriminatory white Canada Immigration Policy in 1967, Canadian immigration officers continued to systematically avoid the entry of Africans into Canada. For instance, between 1950 and 1971, the number of African immigrants who entered Canada was negligible compared to other groups. There has been, however, a steady increase of African immigrants to Canada after 1950.<sup>35</sup>

The first known black to set foot on Canadian soil was Mattieu da Costa. He arrived in Quebec in 1605 with the French force of Pierre de Gua des Monts. Mattieu da Costa's job was said to have been a translator between the French fur traders and the Micmac Indians. Another black who had come to Canada in the early seventeenth century was Olivier le Jeune who was said to have been brought from Madagascar by an Englishman who later sold him to a French clerk. Over the years a trickle of blacks came to Canada as slaves and domestic servants.<sup>36</sup> Prior to the loyalist migration, the number of blacks in Nova Scotia was estimated at 500 persons or 5 percent of the population<sup>37</sup>. Before the American Civil War, there were two major migrations of persons of African descent who settled in Canada. The first group, about 1,500 came to Canada as slaves accompanying the British loyalists who had fled the revolution. The second group of blacks, about 3,000, were free people who had fought on the British side during the revolution. They came to Canada at the promise of the British government to provide them with land and freedom.<sup>38</sup>

The 1977 Act provided for an admissible refugee class "to fulfill Canada's international legal obligations concerning refugees and to uphold its humanitarian tradition with respect to the

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<sup>35</sup> Yohannes Gebreselles, "Canada's Response to Black African Immigrants" in *Refugee*, vol.13. 1, (April 1993).

<sup>36</sup> Ken Alexander and Avis Glaze, *Towards Freedom: The African Canadian Experience*, (Toronto: Umbrella press, 1996), 38.

<sup>37</sup> Burnet and Palmer, *Coming Canadians*, 49.

displaced and persecuted.”<sup>39</sup> This enabled many blacks, who hitherto had found it difficult to enter Canada, to take advantage of this new immigration category and migrate to Canada under the new refugee class. Canada also became a signatory to the convention relating to the protection and status of refugees that came into existence in 1951 under which terms all signatories were obliged to provide protection to refugees.

The 1976-77 Immigration Act, along with the 1978 Immigration Regulations, defined not only Canada’s immigration policy but also its planning and management, the priorities in admission, the basis for exclusion and deportation, the system of control and enforcement, and the criteria for refugee status.... The Act specified three classes of immigrants who would be admitted to Canada: family class, including immediate family and dependents; refugees, including Convention and specially designated displaced persons; and combined third category of independent and assisted family, who would be subject in varying degrees to the point system.... But the most sweeping changes dealt with the statutory commitment to a wide range of refugees, admitted separately from immigrants; this included not only refugees defined by the Geneva Convention and the Protocol of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, but also “designated-class” refugees admitted for humanitarian reasons .... Many of the thousands of Vietnamese refugees who came to Canada between 1979 and 1984 benefited from this plan.<sup>40</sup>

Canada’s assistance to refugees was based on ad hoc arrangements prior to the promulgation of 1977 Immigration Act. This Act created a new category for refugees and other individuals from difficult circumstances, to enter Canada under the refugees and designated individuals section of the Act.

Given the limited economic and political contact between Canada and the African Continent, particularly Sub-Saharan countries, immigrants from Africa came to Canada mainly as refugees fleeing from political and economic instability on the continent. This was also due to the fact that Africa, because of its technological and economic underdevelopment, had not traditionally been a source of skilled labour for Canada. That is why very few Africans were able

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>39</sup> Dirks, Controversy and Complexity, 24.

<sup>40</sup> Avery, Reluctant Host, 191.

to migrate to Canada through the Point system immigration policy introduced in the 1967 Immigration Act.<sup>41</sup> Canada's official policy towards the African refugee problem emphasized the resettlement in first asylum countries or repatriation.

After the 1970s immigration from eastern Africa to Canada dramatically increased due to political and economic instability in this part of Africa, including Ethiopia, Uganda, Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia. For instance, in 1972 Uganda, under Idi Amin, Uganda's dictator, expelled thousands of Ugandan Asians, a significant number of whom came to Canada through resettlement programs. In 1971 the number of immigrants from Africa was 2,841. But after only a year, in 1972, that number increased almost fourfold to 8,308. But the Ugandan Asians were a special case for two reasons. First, Idi Amin gave them an ultimatum to leave the country and there was no first asylum country involved. Second, the Ugandan Asians, as a group, possessed characteristics which could allow them to come to Canada as business immigrants. For instance, the majority of the Ugandans were business people who had entrepreneurial skills and might start their own businesses if assisted.<sup>42</sup>

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Somalia's political chaos let loose hundreds of thousands of refugees into Europe and North America. Unlike the Ugandans or Vietnamese, Somalis did not receive enough publicity in the Canadian media to mobilize support for them. As far as the Somali refugees were concerned, two aspects of Canadian Immigration Policy played an important role in their migration and settlement in Canada. The first is the convention regarding the protection and status of refugees as defined by the United Nations' Convention for Refugees. Canada, as a signatory to this international agreement for the protection of refugees, was obliged

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>42</sup> Rhoda Howard, "Canadian Government's Response to the African Refugee Problem," *Journal of African Studies* 15, no. 1(1981), 103.

by its terms to provide sanctuary to refugees fleeing from political or religious persecution, if they meet the criteria laid out by the Convention. The overwhelming majority of Somalis entered Canada as refugees and applied for convention refugee status upon arrival in Canada. Given the political situation in their country, refugees from Somalia usually met the convention refugee criteria and enjoyed a high rate of acceptance.

Secondly, Somali refugees who were accepted as convention refugees and became permanent residents in Canada sponsored their family members left behind through the family class member category of the Immigration Act. This family reunification opportunity significantly increased the number of Somalis in Canada.

### **CHAPTER 3.**

#### **Political and economic causes of Somali migration to North America**

In order to understand the integration problems faced by Somali refugees, it is necessary to place them in their pre-migration spatial and temporal context. One may ask how were over 30,000 Somali refugees able to reach Canada in a span of few years given the fact that Canada and Somalia are located on two different continents and are separated by about 18000 km of oceans, seas, and land? To answer this question, a brief overview of the major causes of Somali emigration, in late the 1970s to the early 1990s, is in order.

A host of factors, both internal and external, contributed to the mass migration of Somalis to many parts of the world over the last ten to fifteen years. The flood of Somali refugees in the 1988-91 period, in the wake of the civil war that led to the defeat of Siad Barre's regime and the ensuing collapse of the Somali state, was preceded by a slow but steady flow of Somali immigrants to the Arab world, Europe and the United States. Prior to coming to Canada, many Somalis were already working outside Somalia in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Libya, Italy, the USA, the UK and others.<sup>43</sup> In general, this pre-civil war emigration of Somalis can be characterized both as economic and political.

**Political Factors:** Politically, the repressive military government (1969-1991) made it impossible for many Somali politicians, who did not agree with it, to live in the country by denying their basic political rights such as forming a political party or expressing their political views in writing or in public assemblies. Opposition to the regime meant leaving the country or

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<sup>43</sup> Mohamed Osman Omar, Somalia: A Nation Driven to Despair, (London: HAAN Publishing, , 1996), 27.

operating underground, which was almost impossible under the watchful eyes of the multi-layered security system of the regime. As early as 1970, less than a year after the military junta seized power, a number of prominent politicians, such the former Prime Minister, Abdirizak Hajji Hussein, fled the country to escape arrest and/or to carry out antigovernment activities abroad. For those politicians who wanted to topple the government, the only way they could organize their forces was to set up bases in neighboring countries such as Ethiopia and Kenya.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, the adoption of scientific socialism in 1972 as the official ideology of the government, angered religious leaders who interpreted this as a move to replace Islam with socialism. After having proclaimed socialism to be the guiding principles of its revolution, the military junta immediately encountered the opposition of religious leaders, some of whom organized public speeches and denounced the government's policies as anti-Islamic and urged the public to ignore their implementation. One of the most controversial laws that drew sharp criticism from religious leaders in Somalia, as well as from other Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia, was the introduction, in 1975, of a family law. This law recognized some basic rights for women, for example the right to end a marriage contract and the right to an equal inheritance. Sermons were held in mosques throughout the country to denounce the military regime, which had hitherto enjoyed popular support, as a system creating a nation of non-believers. "We might accept any other change the government imposes on us, but we could not accept if it wants us to change our religion."<sup>45</sup> The response of the government was both quick and brutal. A campaign was launched to round up those religious leaders suspected of inciting the public against the regime. On January 23, 1975, ten prominent critics of the government's

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Sheikh Ismael Mohamed, Somali Refugee in Ottawa and former Regional Court Judge in Somalia, (Interview by author, May 17, 1998).

gender equality legislation were made an example of and were publicly executed. Hundreds of others were arrested in an attempt to nip this religious uprising in the bud. “The execution of the ten religious leaders was the first, but not the last, political blunder committed by Siad’s junta. It also unmasked the regime’s brutality and intolerance towards its political opponents”<sup>46</sup>

The government’s security measures were paralleled by a propaganda war on its opponents. Taking advantage of its media monopoly, it accused opponents of the new law as agents of Somalia’s enemies. Siad’s favourite scapegoat, “International Imperialism”, was held responsible for causing all the trouble. Well aware of the sensitivity of religion, the government tried to reconcile Islam with its socialist policies. In a speech President Siad said:

If both socialism and Islam advocate for justice, equality, and the improvement of peoples' lives who can tell me where they differ? Where do they contradict with one another? What harm is there in having the faith of Islam, and at the same time applying socialism as an economic and political system through which our country can progress? I would say none. As far as socialism is concerned, it is not a heavenly message like Islam, but a mere system for regulating the relations between man and his utilisation of the means of production of this world. If we decide to regulate our national wealth, it is not against the essence of Islam. God has created man and has given him the faculty of mind to choose between good and bad, between virtue and vice. We have chosen social justice instead of exploitation of man by man and this is how we can practically help the individual Muslim and direct him to [a] virtuous life. However, the reactionaries want to create a rift between socialism and Islam because socialism is not to their interest...<sup>47</sup>

This crackdown on the opponents of the regime drove some religious fundamentalists into exile. Most of these anti-socialist Muslim fundamentalists fled to Saudi Arabia and to other Arab states in the Gulf, which severed their relations with the Somali government after it had proclaimed socialism as its ideology. Although there are no statistics available on how many Muslim fundamentalists fled the country, in the wake of government’s crackdown on them, a

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<sup>46</sup> I.M. Lewis, Blood and Bone: The Call of Kinship in Somali Society, (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1994), 150.

<sup>47</sup> Jan M. Haakonsen, Scientific Socialism and self-reliance: The Case of Somalia’s “Instant Fishermen” (Bergen: University of Bergen, Norway, 1984), 73.



conservative estimate put the number at about 6,000. It must be mentioned, however, that not all of these exiled Somalis sought refuge in Arab states. Some of these asylum seekers landed in European countries such as Britain and Italy. In the meantime, opposition to the government grew and in 1979 the first armed resistance, the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) was formed, mainly by army officers from the Majeertin clan.

External political intervention also contributed to the instability and migration of its citizens to other countries. Somalia has been an arena of superpower political struggle, which added to the destruction and diaspora of its people. Politics of the Cold War, the constant fierce competition between Western and Eastern blocs for satellite states and military bases across the continents, has had a serious impact on Somalia. Due to its strategic location, both the U.S.A. and Soviet Union spared no effort to secure a military foothold in the Horn of Africa, particularly in Somalia and Ethiopia. Both of them supplied Somalia with a huge amount of modern weapons which eventually got into the hands of rival clan militias and caused the death of thousands of innocent Somalis. The destructive consequences of the Cold War remained visible everywhere in immense stockpiles of weapons available at bargain prices.<sup>48</sup>

In 1974, Somalia concluded military and economic cooperation agreements with the former Soviet Union. By the terms of this agreement, the Soviets were granted a large military base at the port city of Berbera on the Red Sea coast where they established the largest military base ever built on African soil by a foreign power.<sup>49</sup> In exchange for this military base, Somalia was armed to the teeth by the Soviets. This military buildup was of a particular concern to Ethiopia because of a territorial dispute between the two countries. In 1977 Ethiopia's fears became a

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<sup>48</sup> Hussein M. Adam and Richard Ford, Mending Rips in the Sky: Options for Somali Communities in the 21st Century, (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1997), 45.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 46.

reality when Somalia launched an attack against it, in an attempt to reclaim the disputed Ogaden region of Eastern Ethiopia inhabited by ethnic Somalis. In 1978 the Soviets were expelled from Somalia for refusing to support Somalia in its war against Ethiopia. Immediately after the Soviets' departure, the Americans took over the base and continued to supply arms to the Siad Barre Regime. To a greater extent, Siad Barre's regime depended, for its governing capacity, on clever exploitation of the bipolar competition of the Cold War. Needless to say, this military buildup diverted resources from economic and social development and encouraged many people to leave the country. In many ways, Somalia has been an arche-typical beneficiary of superpower conflict, and now it is a victim of their reconciliation.<sup>50</sup>

Another external factor that must be mentioned is the general political and economic situation on the African continent. From this perspective, the Somali case can be seen as a microcosm of the post Cold-War African situation. With few exceptions, African countries are now economically poorer and politically more unstable than at the time of their independence. Across the continent civil wars, the decline of the nation state, and economic stagnation have become the order of the day. In an attempt to account for this reality, African experts and observers put the blame at the door of European colonialism and the politics of the cold-war. What is happening in Africa today is a rejection of European-imposed political and economic systems characterized by the disintegration of the state and the revival of tribalism. Economic theories of both left and right have been tried in Africa with little success.<sup>51</sup>

The European colonial legacy is also blamed by some economists for creating an economic dependency which prevented African economies from growing. Other scholars point to a lack of

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<sup>50</sup> Ali Jimale Ahmed, "Daybreak is near, Won't You Become Sour?: Going beyond the current rhetoric in Somali Studies" in the *Invention of Somalia*, ed. by Ali Jimale (Lawrenceville, NJ, 1995), 340.

<sup>51</sup> Ali A. Mazrui, "Africa's Problems" *Africa Confidential* 30, no. 18 (1989), 7.

technological transfer, the incredibly fast-growing population, and corrupt African governments to be responsible for the chronic economic problems and political instability on the continent. These economic hardships and political instability forced many Africans to emigrate, mainly to their former colonizers. In the Somali case, the process of emigration began in the late 1970s and culminated in the diaspora of 1991 following the violent overthrow of General Mohamed Siad Barre's military regime and the ensuing all-out civil war.

**Economic Factors:** In addition to this political push to emigrate, there was also an economic pull that attracted many Somalis to seek employment in other countries. During the oil-boom years of the 1970s to the early 1980s, an estimated 300,000 Somalis emigrated to the Middle East.<sup>52</sup> Despite the government's strict travel restrictions, many Somalis managed to obtain their passports through bribery and connections with officials in the government and left the country for the Middle East and Europe. For centuries Somalia maintained commercial and religious relations with the Arab world. This historical link helped Somalis to migrate to the Arab Gulf States following the oil-generated economic boom of the 1970s and 1980s. Geographical proximity and improvement of transportation played a role in this population movement from Somalia to the Arabian Peninsula.

These migrant workers helped the economy by remitting money to their relatives or for investment. The government, realizing the economic boost being provided by Somalis outside of the country, particularly much needed foreign currency, relaxed its emigration policy. It allowed, in co-operation with some Arab states, the issuing of passports for a limited number of people. This temporary workers (guest workers as referred to in the Arab states) program was initiated as an alternative way to control immigration by both Somalia and the Arab states. For Somalia it

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<sup>52</sup> Mohamed Nuuh Ali, "needs assessment of Somali Youth in the West End of Ottawa" a study commissioned by Pinecrest-Queensway Community and Health Services, (Ottawa, August, 1995).

meant dealing with economic as well as political pressure. For the receiving countries it meant satisfying local labor shortages and controlling illegal immigrants.

Somalis have a long tradition of labour migration and overseas employment, traditionally crewing on ships. In the decades following independence, the disparity between local wages in Somalia and those obtainable in Arabia and the Gulf States led to a large exodus of able-bodied men. This “muscle-drain” augments the “brain-drain” to the same countries, and was especially strong in the two decades from the mid-sixties to mid eighties, and led to a large influx of remittance earnings in cash and kind.<sup>53</sup>

These would-be migrant workers were selected for their employable skills as well as for the availability of employment in the country of destination. Among the countries in which there was a high demand for cheap labour were Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf states.<sup>54</sup> They agreed to issue work permits and residence permits to these migrant workers who were supposed to return to Somalia after their permits had expired or if they became unemployed. These temporary workers, furthermore, operated networks of relatives to smuggle people into these countries by illegal means.

Despite the brain drain it created, the new policy served the dual purpose for the government. On the one hand it was able to monitor emigration, on the other hand, it provided much needed foreign currency which in turn played a stabilizing role in the economy.

However, there was a political price to be paid by the regime. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States became breeding grounds for Muslim fundamentalists who played a pivotal role in overthrowing the regime in 1991. They found a base where they could organize themselves and recruit new members for their cause. As a result of this demand for cheap manual Somali labor in the Gulf states, combined with the economic uncertainty in Somalia, about half a million Somalis

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<sup>53</sup> I.M. Lewis, Understanding Somalia: A guide to Culture, History and Social Institutions, (London: Haan Associates, 1993), 54.

<sup>54</sup> Ali, “Needs Assessment”, 8.

emigrated to the Middle East.<sup>55</sup>

Two factors contributed to this economic migration. The first is the colonial legacy. Like many other third world countries, there was, over the years, an incessant flow of immigrants to Somalia's former colonizers, Britain, Italy and France, despite strict immigration policies in both Somalia and these countries. Through a variety of ways, such as educational programs, government sponsored seminars and conferences, tourism and official visits, many Somalis had the opportunity to travel to these countries. As there was no other means of legal travel, people took advantage of these government sponsored travel arrangements to leave the country. Usually people who had the opportunity to travel outside Somalia did not return upon completion of their educational program or overstayed their visits or claimed asylum on arrival. "Since the government made it almost impossible to leave the country, people used all kinds of means to get out, including government sponsored travel arrangements<sup>56</sup>. The pressure to emigrate was particularly acute from the late 1980s until the outbreak of the civil war.

All these factors combined - the political repression, domestic and external economic problems, the war with Ethiopia and finally the outbreak of civil war- resulted in the flight of millions of Somalis to many different countries of the world and Canada received more than its share of this Somali refugee influx.

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<sup>55</sup> Omar, Somalia: A Nation Driven to Despair, 272.

<sup>56</sup> Sheik Ismael Mohamed, Somali refugee in Ottawa and former Regional Court Judge in Somalia , Interview by author, May 18, 1998.

## **CHAPTER 4.**

### **Coming to Canada:**

Over the last decade Canada has received an influx of Somali refugees and immigrants. Over 55,000 Somalis are now living in Canada, of which 8,000 live in Ottawa.<sup>57</sup> This number represents the largest number of black immigrants ever to come to Canada within such a short span of time. As I mentioned in the preceding pages, Somalis have been emigrating since the 1970s, but their destination was not Canada. By 1988, when the civil war broke out in Somalia, almost half of the Somalis, who later came to Canada, were living in such places as London, Rome, Paris, Cairo, and so on, as asylum seekers, temporary workers, students, diplomats and conference participants. Opposition groups, who were fighting against the military government of President Mohamed Siad Barre, threw the baby out with the bath water in their attempt to overthrow the regime. What was expected to be the end of twenty years of military dictatorship, human rights abuses, and an undemocratic political system proved to be the beginning of a destructive civil war that caused the death and destruction of hundreds of thousands of Somalis as well as the collapse of the Somali state. In general, most Somalis who made it to Canada in the earlier waves of Somali refugees were those who had the economic means to travel or had relatives to help them pay for their trip.

Somali immigrants came to Canada in three different waves, each reflecting the political and economic realities in Somalia. They began to come to Canada in visible numbers in the mid-1980s, mostly from the USA. This first group consisted mainly of political asylum seekers belonging to opposition groups which had been militarily defeated by the regime. Also included in this group were those politicians and human rights activists who were exiled from Somalia.

One reason why these opponents of Siad Barre came to Canada via the US, while they could seek political asylum there, is that Washington maintained friendly relations with Somalia and was reluctant to offer a safe haven to the opponent of the regime.

The first Somalis to arrive in Ottawa were members of the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) and the Somali National Movement (SNM ) opposition groups.<sup>58</sup> After they had fought for several years against the regime with little success, some members became disillusioned with their movement and decided to seek political asylum in the West. “When we came here in 1984, we couldn’t find any other Somalis in the whole city of Ottawa. It was a very difficult time for us because we knew nobody here, no one to socialize with or talk to.”<sup>59</sup> This first group consisted of politicians and intellectuals, mostly men, and represented less than five percent of the total number of Somali immigrants/refugees in Ottawa. For example in 1984, only 7 Somalis entered Canada as refugees.<sup>60</sup> Over ninety percent of Somali immigrants came to Ottawa in the last eight years as refugees and /or through family reunification programs, following the outbreak of civil war in Somalia in 1988. However, the pioneer group played an important role in finding a new destination for prospective Somali immigrants/refugees to Canada. Many Somalis were already outside Somalia when General Mohamed Siad Barre was overthrown by a country-wide armed rebellion in 1991. Barre’s overthrow was welcome news for many Somalis in foreign countries and they wanted to go back home if things settled down. Unfortunately, their hopes were dashed very quickly as the opposition groups which overthrew the military dictatorship of Siad Barre failed to establish a national government and turned the

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<sup>57</sup> Immigration and Refugee Board, *Immigration Statistics*(1996). p. 89

<sup>58</sup> This refers only to those Somalis who came as asylum seekers or refugees. Canadian Immigration records show Somalis who came as visitors or for business purposes as far back as 1972. It is difficult, however, to determine how many of these visitors changed their status to asylum seekers after their initial entry into Canada.

<sup>59</sup> Said Abdi, Somali Refugee in Ottawa, Interview by author, May 20, 1998.

<sup>60</sup> . Canada Immigration and Refugee Board, *Immigration statistics*, (1984).

gun on each other.

Some Somalis in Europe and the Middle East also joined this first group as the job market in the Middle East dwindled and as the news that Canada was accepting Somali refugees reached Somalis in these countries. From 1984 to early 1988 a trickle of Somali immigrants from Europe and the Arab States continued to arrive in Canada, mainly through the U.S.A. Somali refugees enjoyed a high rate of acceptance in their claims for convention refugee status<sup>61</sup> in Canada, even before the outbreak of the civil war in Somalia in 1988. This means that Somalis entered Canada illegally and upon arrival told Canadian Immigration that they were fleeing from persecution in their country. This made them eligible to stay in Canada and apply for convention refugee status, and those whose claims were accepted became permanent residents.

One of the major reasons for this high rate of acceptance for Somali refugees was the exposure, by western media and human rights groups, of the human rights abuses in Somalia. Human rights groups published reports, sometimes exaggerated, on political and religious persecutions in Somalia, thus making it easy for Somalis who came, for instance from Saudi Arabia, to claim that they could not go back to their country for fear of persecution even if this claim might not be true. "A major human rights group says Somalia's government has in the past 19 months killed 50,000 to 60,000 civilians – many shot in their homes- whom it suspected of supporting or sympathizing with insurgents. Somalia also has driven about half a million others into exile."<sup>62</sup> In an attempt to put pressure on Siad Barre's regime to introduce a multiparty political system, the U.S. launched a propaganda campaign against the Somali regime and suspended military and economic aid for its alleged human rights violations.

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<sup>61</sup> Convention Refugee Status refers to the Geneva Convention of 1951 which obliged signatories to this convention to protect refugees fleeing from fear of persecution on the grounds of "race, religion, and membership of a specific group. Canada became a signatory to the Geneva Convention in 1969.



Congressional opposition to aid to Somalia has been led by Democratic Representatives Howard Wolpe of Michigan and William H. Gray, III, of Pennsylvania. This September Gray introduced a sense of Congress Resolution that initiated upon "significant improvements in the area of human rights as a precondition to resumption of foreign assistance to Somalia."<sup>63</sup>

This anti-Somali regime international media campaign created a situation where Somalis in any country of the world could come to Canada and claim convention refugee status long before the civil war began in Somalia. For example, a Somali in Italy or in England, who might have lived there for many years, would come to Canada and claim refugee status saying she or he fled from persecution in Somalia. Many of these Somalis might have left Somalia for political reasons, but there were some who did not belong to those groups persecuted by the regime for their political or religious views, but who took advantage of media misinformation.

The refugee status opportunity enabled many Somalis to sponsor their relatives and family members after they had acquired landed immigrant status. To sponsor a family member or a relative, refugees must first succeed in their convention refugee claims and then wait until they become landed immigrants or acquire permanent residence status which could take between six months to three years. Many Somali refugees were separated from their families during the flight from the civil war and wanted to sponsor them as soon as they became landed immigrants. Somalia's extended family structure meant that individuals who made it to Canada would sponsor as many members of the extended family as possible. In order to get around Canada Immigration's narrow definition of family class members, many Somali refugees/immigrants told immigration officers that they were sponsoring their wives/husbands and children while these people were their brothers and sisters or even other distant relatives. In short, the extended family networks played an important role in bringing more Somalis to Canada, legally or illegally. Somali speakers of other nationalities such as Kenyan Somalis, Ethiopian or Djibouti

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<sup>62</sup> . Robert Dowden, "Somalia is disintegrating into anarchy," in The Independent, (England) October 10, 1989, 10.

Somalis also migrated to Canada as refugees from Somalia proper. Most of these individuals would apply for a visitor's visa at the US Embassy either in their countries or in other countries and if they succeed in obtaining it would cross to Canada after arriving in the USA and claim to be refugees from Somalia. Obviously Canada Immigration had no way of knowing whether these people came from Somalia or from other countries with a Somali speaking population. "I was born in Kenya, grew up in Kenya and I have never been to Somalia. However, I consider myself as a Somali and when I came to Canada I told Canadian Immigration that I came from Somalia."<sup>64</sup>

Somali refugees presented Canada Immigration with a unique and difficult case in two respects. First, given the nature and complexity of Somali political conflict, it became rather difficult to determine whether Somali individuals claiming refugee status met the criteria for convention refugee status. Second, Somalis live in several different countries in Africa, such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti; and Immigration Officers found it impossible to know whether the refugee claimants came from Somalia or from these other countries where Somali speaking ethnic groups live. As a result of this confusion and as the number of Somali refugees increased, Canada Immigration introduced new restrictions in 1993 aimed at dealing with refugee claimants, particularly those from Somalia.

Among the amendments made to the 1995 Immigration Act was a provision that affected the rights of individuals, deemed to be convention refugees, to be granted permanent residence.

An Immigration Officer shall not grant landing either to an applicant.....or to any dependent of the applicant until the applicant is in possession of a valid and subsisting Passport or travel document or a satisfactory identity document<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> . The Washington Post, October 26 (1989), A20.

<sup>64</sup> Name withheld at the request of the respondent, Somali refugee in Ottawa, Interview by the author, Ottawa, July 13, 1999.

<sup>65</sup> Citizenship and Immigration, Canada Immigration Act, Section 46.04 (8), as amended on February 1, 1993 (Ottawa, February 1993).

The second wave of Somali refugees began to reach Canada in mid-1988 following the outbreak of civil war in the northern part of Somalia. For sometime Somalia was politically unstable and the government of President Mohamed Siad Barre had been fighting against a number of armed opposition groups on several fronts. In fact, Siad Barre held onto power much longer than predicted by many political observers in the Horn of Africa. Among these rebel groups was the SNM (Somali National Movement) which drew its support mainly from the Isaak clan of the north-western region. The SNM operated from bases in Ethiopia, and in 1988 it escalated its attacks against government troops. In a surprise attack, it captured several major cities including Hargeisa, the second largest city in Somalia and the capital of the north-western region. The government responded with a counterattack using heavy weapons, including bombers and jet fighters, to retake these cities. During the ensuing battles between government troops and SNM fighters, Hargeisa, Buroa and other cities were completely destroyed.

Thousands were killed and hundreds of thousands fled from the fighting to the neighbouring countries of Ethiopia and Jibouti. There have been massive displacements of persons as a result of the civil conflict. The Isaak population of northern Somalia has been driven into remote rural areas, and many hundreds of thousands are living in exile in Ethiopia, and Djibouti, and fewer in Kenya.<sup>66</sup>

A significant number of Somali refugees in these countries began to travel to Canada through various means and routes. Some refugees took advantage of resettlement programs arranged by international organizations such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), religious groups and governments. Others were able to travel to Canada on their own by fake documents or under false names. Some refugees were sponsored by their relatives already in Canada. Due to their strong kinship ties or extended family networks in Canada and in other western countries, newer waves of Somali refugees tended to gravitate

towards those who preceded them to Canada.

In the societies from which many immigrants came, far more aspects of life were regulated by kinship than in North America and feelings of familial responsibility were stronger... Families were rarely looked upon as consisting simply of parents and children: they were extended or joint families, embracing three or more generations and several collateral lines, that is, cousins, of several degrees<sup>67</sup>

Coming to a culture that is at odds with their old ways, Somali refugees sought comfort in their kin ties and did everything to bring them to Canada. For instance, through family reunification programs, 1178 Somalis came to Canada from 1991 to 1994.<sup>68</sup> By 1989 the trickle of Somali refugees to Canada changed to a stream and case-load for refugee claimants increased three fold. In 1991 Somalia topped the list of major refugees source countries from Africa.

Table #2

10 Top Refugee Source Countries from Africa (January 1 to December 31, 1991)

Country of origin	Number of refugee claims	Acceptance rate (%)
1. Somalia	4,059	92.6
2. Ghana	714	45.0
3. Ethiopia	557	84.8
4. Nigeria	283	31.0
5. Zaire	262	83.8
6. Seychelles	254	85.6
7. Sudan	177	87.7

<sup>66</sup> Amnesty International, "Somali government's human rights violations: *A Report*", New York, September 18, 1990, 273.

<sup>67</sup> Jean Burnet and Howard Palmer, *Coming Canadians: An Introduction to a History of Canada's Peoples*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988) p. 82-83.

<sup>68</sup> Immigration and Refugee Board, *Immigration statistics: family reunification category*, Ottawa, (1994), 34.

8. Kenya	124	73.8
9. Algeria	103	52.2
10. Mali	98	65.2
Total	6,631	83.5

Source: Immigration and Refugee Board, news release, Feb. 11, 1992.

Meanwhile the political situation of the country fast deteriorated, and full scale civil war started throughout the country. On January 27, 1991 government troops were defeated in the capital Mogadishu, and Siad Barre fled to the south of the country. Many Somalis who could afford to travel voted with their feet, even those in relatively safe parts of the country, and headed for safer places.

The year 1991 represents the third wave of Somali refugees seeking a safe-haven in Canada. The civil war in Somalia and the human tragedy it caused drew international attention. More than two million Somali refugees fled to the neighboring countries and found themselves in refugee camps in such countries as Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Djibouti. Many of these refugees made it to Canada through several means of travel including government assisted refugees, using fake documents and sponsoring programs. The same travel methods were employed as mentioned before. In the survey 70% of the respondents said they had come to Canada on their own. 25% reported they were sponsored by family members or relatives and the remaining 5% said they were brought over by the Canadian government and humanitarian agencies.

## **Chapter 5.**

### **RESETTLING IN OTTAWA:**

Resettlement provides refugees a new life where they may become productive members of the adopted society, leaving their fear of persecution behind. Government and non-governmental organizations in the host countries offer an array of material and moral assistance to facilitate the refugees' economic and cultural adaptation. The length and efficiency, however, of this adaptation process is a function of a number of factors such as the socio-economic and political background of the resettling group and the reception and assistance accorded the new group by the receiving society. It is important, therefore, to contextualize the process of refugee resettlement, studying each group from their specific perspective.

A sizable number of Somali refugees, more than seven thousand<sup>69</sup> settled in Ottawa between 1986 and 1994. Somali refugees who came to Ottawa faced the difficult task of trying to heal the emotional wounds from the civil war in Somalia and adjusting to a new and different socio-cultural milieu in Canada. When the goal of finding peace was realized, the pains of restarting life in a strange country began.

The fact that their journeys are unplanned makes refugee settlement a difficult enterprise. Some Somali refugees did not even know that they would end up in Canada. Preoccupied with the goal of finding a safe haven, they traveled to Canada because of rumor that they would be accepted as refugees. Living in squalid refugee camps in Africa, as was the case for many Somalis, they knew they had nothing to lose by coming to Canada. They wanted to get as far away as possible from the conflict in Somalia and were seeking to settle in any country that would provide them with peace. As mentioned in the preceding pages, the overwhelming

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<sup>69</sup> Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Population, Population Statistics Section, Nation's Series C.D.Rom, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Catalogue no. 93, F0020XCB-96-004, (Ottawa, September, 1998).

majority of Somalis came to Canada as refugees following the outbreak of the civil war in Somalia in 1988. However, there were some who migrated to Canada prior to the civil war as asylum seekers.<sup>70</sup> In most cases, Somali refugees entered Canada through a third country, mainly the USA, or arrived on flights from Europe and made their claims at a Canadian airport.

The first thing a refugee would be required to do, upon arriving in Canada, would be to declare his/her intention of applying for a refugee status. This process is complex and lengthy depending on a number of factors such as the individual making the claim, the political situation of his/her country and the Canadian Immigration guidelines regarding that particular country. A refugee claim can be made either at the port of entry or an inland claim after entry. The majority of Somali refugees made their claims at ports of entry as they did not have visitor visas to enter Canada. This meant that they had to wait at the port of entry until some arrangements were made such as interpreters and legal representation for the claimants, before they were allowed to enter Canada.

Among the many hurdles Somali refugees experienced at this stage of their migration to Canada was the requirement that they had to recount their stories of escape or journeys to Canada. This was because they had to establish a credible basis for their claim, so that Canada might accept them as genuine convention refugees. This forced them to tell how their relatives were killed, how they survived attacks and how they were able to travel to Canada. "It was painful to retell my experience or my story of what I had seen in Somalia because I was trying to forget all about it, to recover from and shut that part of my memory."<sup>71</sup> The effects of torture and violence experienced and witnessed by many Somali refugees made the settlement process more difficult. Post-traumatic stress affects refugees and manifests its effects in many forms such as

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<sup>70</sup> According to the Canada Immigration and Refugee Board, the first Somali to apply for convention refugee status came in 1982. I was not able to find out who these first Somali refugees were.

depression, loneliness, and anxiety. It is not only these experiences that hinder adaptation and integration, but lack of understanding and treatment for these conditions is also a problem.<sup>72</sup> For their claim of convention refugees to be processed, they have to provide a coherent and consistent story about why they were seeking protection in Canada. The following is an example:

You are claiming to be a convention refugee by reason of a well-founded fear of persecution in the country of your nationality, or if you do not have a country of nationality, in the country of your former habitual residence. Your claim to a well-founded fear of persecution must be related to one or more of the five grounds cited in the definition of a convention refugee as contained in subsection 2.(1) of the Immigration Act, namely: race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion. In order to support your claim, please provide the following information:

A). Set out in chronological order, **all the significant incidents** which caused you to seek protection outside of your country of nationality or former habitual residence. Please also make reference to any measures taken against you, your family members, or any other individuals in a similar situation....<sup>73</sup>

The process of refugee claim determination in Canada is inherently designed to elicit information from claimants in a way that requires them to recount their experience as it relates to their claim. This may rekindle unpleasant memories of incidents where they were tortured or members of their family were killed. Some refugees, because of the trauma they had experienced, were not able to recall all the details in a consistent manner and failed to convince Canadian Refugee Board Judges and their cases were rejected.

The violence, indignities of torture and humiliation often experienced by refugees from war zone areas severely inhibited their capacity to reconstruct their lives in the new societies that received them. Immigrants were underrepresented in the general population in terms of

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<sup>71</sup> Asli Said Jama, Somali refugee in Ottawa, interview by author, Ottawa, June 2, 1998.

<sup>72</sup> Barry Stein, "The Refugee Experience: Defining the Parameters of a Field of Study", *International Migration Review*, 15, no. 1(1981), 45.

<sup>73</sup> Canada Immigration and Refugee Board, Personal Information Form to be filled in by persons seeking convention refugee status in Canada.



psychiatric referrals, but when referred tended to manifest more serious emotional disorders.<sup>74</sup>

The important point to recognize regarding refugee experiences is that refugees suffer from trauma during all stages of their ordeal from the time of departure from their home country to long after settlement into the host community.

Trauma and dislocation are often perpetuated by the waiting game, both within the refugee camps (generally 1-3 years), and during the waiting period for processing of immigration papers, which is on average, two years. During this waiting period, many aspects of the refugee's life, including school and work, are put on hold.<sup>75</sup> Many Somali refugees could not work or go to school, because their immigration status was yet to be determined. Additionally, most Somali refugees suffered from separation from their family members. For some refugees separation from family members took place in the early stage of their departure from the war zone. For others, however, it was a deliberate decision dictated by financial restrictions and travel circumstances. For instance, a family might have enough money for only one or two members to come to Canada. Such a family could decide to send one member to Canada in the hope that she/he would be able to help the family later, while others remained in refugee camps, resulting in a painful separation. The use of kin networks among immigrant groups to help members of extended families, particularly in times of extraordinary circumstances, is not a new phenomenon, but has always been a feature of most immigrant groups to North America.

During the first major wave of immigrants of non-British, non-French origins, people were often enabled to migrate to North America by help from the family. It was usually a young man who came first, aided by financial contributions of his father, his uncles and his cousins. He was expected not only to repay his passage money but also to contribute to the welfare of the his kin group. He might do so by remitting funds home or assisting young relatives to join him; they were usually cousins and nephews rather than brothers, for several ethnic groups considered that "it is enough if one son goes

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<sup>74</sup> Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill and Stacy Churchill, The Pulse of the World: Refugees in our Schools, ( Toronto: OISE Press, 1994), 84.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 85.

overseas".<sup>76</sup>

For the first four years of their migration to Canada, Somali refugees enjoyed a high rate of acceptance in their refugee claims. The refugee acceptance rate of Somalis did not fall below 90 percent between 1990 and 1992 and it rose from 90 percent in 1990 to 95 percent in 1992.<sup>77</sup> However, after 1993 the rate of acceptance of Somali refugees dropped slightly due to Canada Immigration's requirement that Somali refugees provide valid identity documents in order for them to be accepted as convention refugees or to acquire landed immigrant status. The ostensible reason given by Canada Immigration for denying permanent resident status to Somalis was that they could not know whether Somali-speaking refugee claimants actually came from Somalia or from other countries with a Somali-speaking population such as Ethiopia and Kenya. It was, therefore, an attempt on the part of Canada Immigration, to "weed out" bogus refugee claims. Canada Immigration also expressed security concerns in its decision to decline refugee claims by Somali speaking individuals and others from other countries.

Hundreds of refugees in Canada are facing delays in obtaining landed immigrant status because they do not have documents proving their identity. The change is part of a federal government crack down on refugee claims who use fake documents or arrive in Canada with no identification papers. Immigration officials say they want to prevent criminals and cheaters from becoming permanent residents. Refugees without documents have been put on hold. Most of those affected are Somalis. About 70,000 Somali refugees have fled to Canada, escaping a brutal civil war and famine. Many used fake documents to leave since there is no government to issue valid passports.<sup>78</sup>

The identity document requirement was a condition few Somali refugees could meet, given the circumstances under which most Somalis had left their country. When the war broke out in their cities, many Somali refugees fled for safety in a hasty manner, hoping they would soon

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<sup>76</sup> Jean Burnett and Howard Palmer, Coming Canadians: An Introduction to a History of Canada's Peoples, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988), 83.

<sup>77</sup> Edward Opoku-Dapaah, Somali Refugees in Toronto: A Profile (Toronto: York University, York Lanes Press, 1993) p. 37

<sup>78</sup> Ottawa Citizen, November 21, 1993, A6.

return to their homes. Unfortunately, after almost ten years, they are still hoping to return.

Unlike immigrants of choice, Somalis did not have the opportunity of pre-migration orientation about life in Canada. They were happy that they made it to Canada and away from the endless tribal wars in Somalia, but they were not prepared to start a new life in Canada. As well as being new to Canada, Somali refugees did not have the advantage of an established Somali community in Canada to cushion their initial adjustment into the new environment. This was particularly true of those who came in the late 1980s and early 1990s. There were some who had arrived in Canada prior to 1988 and sponsored their family members or relatives after they had acquired permanent resident status, but their number was small and they were not organized to provide any meaningful assistance to the influx of Somali refugees who came to Canada between 1988 and 1993. Those Somalis whose relatives were living in Canada before their arrival might have received assistance from them, but the majority had to fend for themselves.

In 1989 when I came to Ottawa, there were a few Somali refugees already in the city, but I did not know anyone of them...and there was not a Somali community organization or a centre where you could find them. It took me sometime to see them but it was a great relief for me to meet with some Somalis. They were refugees just like myself, but we chatted and had tea together.<sup>79</sup>

After their immigration status was determined, Somali refugees had to find their way in Canadian society. The initial stage of settlement involved finding shelter, food and a safe environment. Upon arrival, and after they had made their convention refugee claims, Somalis could apply for financial assistance, for food and shelter. However, most of them did not know where to go for this help provided to newcomers. "The Immigration Officer gave us some papers and told us, through an interpreter, that I could go to this place for shelter, that place for money, and that I had to find someone to translate for me<sup>80</sup>. Coming from a different socio-cultural

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<sup>79</sup> Mohamed Osman, Somali refugee in Ottawa, interview by author, Ottawa, July 17, 1999.

<sup>80</sup> . Ahmed Jama, Somali refugee in Ottawa, interview by author, Ottawa, June 5, 1998.

background, Somali refugees had unique needs that the existing settlement services could not meet. They needed a survival guide for dealing with their new socio-economic milieu. The cold Canadian winter was, for instance, the first adjustment shock for them.

We never had so many clothes on us before....weather in Somalia is always warm. Sometimes it rains, but you don't need to wrap yourself up with many bundles of clothes like in Canada. My first experience in Canadian winter was terrible. I put several pieces of clothes on me and I could not move... I felt so heavy and I could not walk...I fell down several times in few minutes...it was so unreal I could not imagine people could live in a place as cold as here.... but after four years, I'm rather used to it now.<sup>81</sup>

The process of resettlement began with the provision of some immediate basic needs such as shelter, food and a safe environment. Community shelters in Ottawa were overwhelmed with Somali refugees in the early 1990s.<sup>82</sup> Other than receiving of some basic needs such as food and shelter, Somalis were left to their own devices in terms of dealing with the challenges of adjusting to the socio-economic environment. Among the barriers they faced were learning a new language, adapting to a strange cold weather, and eating unfamiliar foods.

When asked about the reasons why they chose to settle in Ottawa, refugee respondents gave different answers. For some Somali refugees the decision to settle in Ottawa was influenced by the desire to join other family members or relatives who were already living there. This applies only to those who arrived in Canada after 1988. Since there were not many Somalis in Canada prior to 1988, those refugees who had come earlier did not have the opportunity to be assisted by other fellow Somalis when they came to Canada. However, this assistance was not available to those Somali refugees who were the first to arrive in Canada, the pathfinders. To have a relative

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<sup>81</sup> Asha Jama, Somali refugee in Ottawa, interview by author, July 18, 1998.

<sup>82</sup> Sylvia Thompson, "Somali Women in Ottawa" Thesis presented as a partial requirement for the M.A. degree at the department of history, Carleton University, (April, 1994), 34.

or a member of one's extended family in a foreign country, as far as Somali culture goes, is like having an insurance policy to fall back on in times of difficulties or loss. The flow of the overwhelming majority of immigrants into a small number of urban centres was driven by the desire to live close to relatives and other members of the same ethnic group rather than economic demand.<sup>83</sup> A significant number of Somalis, particularly those who came in the 1990s, said they were sponsored by their family members or relatives in Ottawa. Somali refugees who came in the earlier years (1986-1989) and acquired landed immigrant status sponsored their families and relatives. Between 1988 and 1997, 12,466 Somalis entered Canada as family class immigrants sponsored by their relatives in Canada. About a fourth of this number were destined for Ottawa.<sup>84</sup>

Sponsoring family members and relatives has always been important for immigrants to Canada. Many of Canada's immigrants were helped by their families to come to Canada. When they arrived, they in turn brought out other members of their families or started new families. Immigrants have tended to consider the family one of their most important institutions. They have been critical of the Canadian family as being less warm and cohesive than the family as an institution in their homelands.<sup>85</sup>

For other Somali refugees, Ottawa was the first Canadian city they arrived in after they had flown from Europe, made their refugee claims and decided to stay. Urban centres have always been an attractive destination for immigrants and people from the margins of societies, because big cities provide many opportunities and services which are not available in small towns and rural areas. Also cities are places where people from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds live and interact. Immigrants and refugees have chosen to settle more and more in urban centres, particularly in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal.<sup>86</sup> Given their refugee status,

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<sup>83</sup> Martin Loney, *The Pursuit of Division: Race, Gender, and Preferential Hiring in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 217.

<sup>84</sup> Employment and Immigration Canada, *Immigration Statistics*, 1997.

<sup>85</sup> Burnett and Palmer, *Coming Canadians*, 93.

<sup>86</sup> Barbara Burnaby, "Coordinating Settlement Services: Why Is It So Difficult" in *Refugee Policy: Canada and United States*, edited by Howard Adelman (Toronto: York Lanes Press Ltd., 1991), 356.

their socio-economic background and the lack of a established community to help them adjust to Canadian society, Somali refugees faced enormous settlement obstacles. Somalis came to Canada as refugees and exiles who had lost everything they had ever owned or cherished.

## **Chapter 6.**

### **Canadian Public Reaction to Somali refugees**

Since there is no research, to my knowledge, on how the Canadian public viewed the Somali refugee influx, it is hard to say what the public felt toward them. However, judging by some newspaper coverage of Somali refugees in Canada, it appears that the Somalis were initially well-received and did not encounter hostility or discriminatory treatment. This could be because of their small numbers for the first the few years and the fact that the Somali refugee issue was little-known in earlier years, receiving only an infrequent attention from the Canadian media as a five-second news item rather than editorial analysis. The media plays an important role, through its coverage of socio-economic and political issues, in creating images, both positive and negative, about different groups or institutions.

“... what the media of the society at large say or imply about the ethnic groups reflects and influences the treatment they as collectivities and their individual members receive.....At least as important to members of various ethnic groups is the treatment they receive in the printed mass media. Such treatment is usually taken, on the other hand, as an expression of the attitudes of the dominant group or groups and, on the other, a powerful force in shaping those attitudes...”<sup>87</sup>

The Canadian media provided occasional coverage of the Somali civil war portraying it as a natural consequence of an end of many years of military dictatorship and the demise of socialist systems throughout the world. This portrayal of Somali refugees as victims of forces beyond their control generated a considerable amount of sympathy, as the following Ottawa Citizen article indicates. This sympathy has not, however, translated into practical assistance. There were, to my knowledge, no Somali families sponsored by Canadian families.

The people of Ottawa-Carleton are not cold, uncaring or lacking in generosity, but we have failed to recognize the desperate need of the Somali

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<sup>87</sup>Jean Burnett and Howard Palmer, Coming Canadians: An Introduction to a History of Canada's Peoples, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988), 197-203

families in our midst. In 1979, Mayor Marion Dewar challenged the community to welcome 40,000 "boat people" fleeing Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. And during the next few years the community responded en masse, despite the onset of a recession. More than 300 families, Churches, and other organizations welcomed the newcomers, sponsored them financially and offered everything from on-the-job experience to friendship. Today most of these refugees are well-established, contributing members of society. The 8000, to 10,000 Somalis in the region arrived under different circumstances. Sponsorships for the Asian refugees were arranged in advance, their refugee status was settled before they set foot in Canada, and local families were financially committed to helping them for one year. By comparison, most Somalis have been fending for themselves since coming to Canada... The needs of these people, however, are just as great. Local politicians should take time out from their football franchise deliberations and lead community efforts to promote more links with the most isolated and vulnerable residents in this region. At the very least Councilors should ask local service clubs, church groups and other organizations for volunteers who could befriend Somali families, learn from them and help them with everything from shopping tips to Canadian work experience. Some single mothers, for instance miss the support of their extended families and would appreciate a stand-in grandmother for their children."<sup>88</sup>

Canada's acceptance of an increasing number of refugees from Somalia can be looked at from two perspectives. First, in the light of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Third World, and subsequent political and economic upheavals in these parts of the world, Canada, as a member of the free world and a victor of the cold war, has a role to play in the creation of the "New World Order." A significant thrust of this theory of a New World Order, according to former US President George Bush, is to assist former socialist countries during the critical period of transition to capitalism.

The re-packaged New World Order, designed under such veils as "the rule of law, "peace, "stability", "democracy", and "equal sovereignty rights," is a "crusading movement" to promote world hegemony. This new form of post-Cold War global expansion intends to recreate the world after the images of the New World Order's system of governance and open economic market. The New World Order system was supposed to help those countries suffering from the after-shocks of the collapse of socialism make a successful transition to the market economy, using international institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and IMF which are the rationalization instruments for global hegemony.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> The Ottawa Citizen, Tuesday, December 1, 1992.

<sup>89</sup> Pat Lauderdale and Pietro Toggia, "An Indigenous View of the New World Order: Somalia and the Ostensible Rule of Law" in Journal of Asian and African Studies, no. 2, (May, 1999), 169.



Somali refugees, coming from a socialist regime that created chaos, could be seen in this light. In general this was a time when the world was dealing with the communist aftermath and Somalia was a former satellite of the former Soviet Union, and its people were eligible for western help. The ill-fated US led United Nations' Somalia Mission "Operation Restore Hope" from 1992 to 1994 was part of this general trend of imposing the "New World Order" on those countries deemed to be outside of the new system.

Secondly, Canada by signing the Geneva Convention Refugee Agreement of 1951 committed itself to providing sanctuary to those individuals who meet convention refugee criteria. Furthermore, the Somali refugee influx coincided with Canada's adoption of more liberal immigration and refugee policies, for example, the setting up of the Immigration and Refugee Board in 1988.

Generally, the Canadian government has followed a liberal internationalist approach with regard to migration that reflects a humanitarian perspective to the problem of refugees and displaced people within the constraints of its domestic socio-economic and political objectives..... The 1976 Immigration Act recognizes Canada's international obligation to refugees, the displaced and the persecuted. In that regard, Canada has welcomed significant numbers of displaced people from all over the world. When Canada introduced the refugee class in 1976, African refugees were mainly from Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Djibouti, and Uganda<sup>90</sup>

The African immigrant population has been growing since Canada abandoned its discriminatory, white Canada immigration policy in 1977. Due to political and economic instability in Africa, the majority of immigrants from Africa have so far been refugees and/or political asylum seekers. The increasing number of immigrants from Africa also reflects the impact of globalization on population movement across continents as the have-nots of the southern hemisphere attempt to join the haves of the northern hemisphere.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Yahannes Gebresellaise "Canada's Response to Black African Immigrants" in Refugee, 13, no.1 (April, 1993), 11.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 15.

It is important to mention, however, that although Canada accepted a large number of Somali refugees who had come on their own, it did not participate in the process of resettling Somali refugees. Unlike some other refugee groups such as the Vietnamese, Hungarians, Ugandans and Tibetans, Canadian government and non-governmental organizations did not participate or assist, in any significant way, in the migration of Somali refugees to Canada. Only 3% of Somali refugees, according to the responses given by the participants of the survey questionnaire, came through the assistance of the Canadian government's overseas refugees selection program. Canada Immigration did not foresee the arrival of Somali refugees in such great numbers. They did not come to Canada in an orderly or organized fashion. The media began to cover Somali refugees only after they had knocked on the Canadian door. Thus, there was lack of awareness on the part of the Canadian public about the arrival in Canada and plight of Somali refugees. It was mostly a "silent influx."<sup>92</sup>

Given the political turmoil and the history of human rights abuses in Somalia, the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board found it almost impossible to reject refugee claims submitted by Somali nationals. This was despite the fact that the majority of these claims were made within Canada or at a port of entry in Canada. Inland refugee claims, according to Canada Immigration, are prone to abuse and Immigration Officers exercise extra caution when processing these claims to ensure they are genuine. Moreover, due to its decreasing population growth, Canada, developed an immigration policy which recommended an annual immigration intake of about 250,000 persons of which 35,000 was allocated for the humanitarian class.<sup>93</sup> This policy reflects

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<sup>92</sup>The Canadian government downplayed the issue of Somali refugees, given the lack of any political or economic interest group to raise this issue to a national level. No group pressured the government to mobilize public support for Somali refugees.

<sup>93</sup> Donald H. Avery, *Reluctant Host: Canada's Response to Immigrant Workers, 1896-1994*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1994), 178.

concerns over the declining fertility rate in Canada and the increasing numbers of pensioners.

In June of 1985, the new Conservative government undertook a review of immigration policy, the conclusions from which are evident in a special report to parliament presented by the Minister in charge of immigration in June 1985 (Canada 1985a) and in the Annual Report to Parliament on Future Immigration Levels...A central concern in these reports is that fertility in Canada had fallen below replacement levels with the implication that population would begin to decline just after the turn of the century if immigration was maintained at its current low level....Immigration would be used primarily to bolster population growth and to try to readjust the overall age structure of the population so that there would be enough workers to pay for the baby boomers' pensions and health care.<sup>94</sup>

It is, therefore, part of Canada's immigration policy to allow some prospective immigrants to come on humanitarian grounds without passing through the point system selection process. This strategy means meeting Canada's humanitarian obligations while adding to its population growth, thus killing two birds with one stone. In November 1992, Canada announced a series of initiatives to accelerate the process of granting permanent residence status to Somali families in Canada who had relatives abroad. More immigration officers were sent to refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia to speed up the sponsorship cases of Somalis. "Between October of 1992 and February of 1993, a total of 1,200 visas was issued to Somali refugees joining their families in Canada. And by the end of 1992, more than ten thousand Somalis became permanent residents in Canada."<sup>95</sup>

However, this sympathy was short-lived. In late 1993, as the number of Somalis noticeably increased and kept coming, much of the good-will and charitable attitude towards Somali refugees faded. The media replaced the stories about the plight and traumatic experiences of Somali refugees with allegations of welfare fraud by Somalis and the economic burden they

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<sup>94</sup>A.G. Green and A.D. Green. "Canadian Immigration Policy: The Effectiveness of the Point System and other Instruments," *Canadian Journal of Economics*, (November, 1995), 1025.

<sup>95</sup> Citizenship and Immigration, News Release by Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Mr. Sergio Marchi, speaking at the Canadian Council for Refugees, June 1, (1994).

inflicted on Canadian taxpayers. "Fraudulent refugees are siphoning tens of millions of dollars from Ontario's welfare system to buy weapons for warlords in Somalia."<sup>96</sup> In addition to allegations of welfare fraud by Somali refugees, the media also accused Canada Immigration of letting in Somali criminals who had served the former dictator, Siad Barre, and had committed crimes against humanity. A television documentary by CBC's "Fifth Estate" on October 16, 1993 featured Somali refugees who allegedly committed crimes against humanity while in Somalia, among them former ministers and generals.

An internal federal government report concludes that bogus refugees are pillaging Ontario's welfare system to fund clan activities in Somalia, Liberal Leader Lyn McLeod told the legislature Wednesday. "This whole process appears to be designed to send money back to Somalia to fund the purchase of weapons and arms for fighting in that country", McLeod told the legislature....According to this report, these kinds of activities are costing Ontario taxpayers tens of millions of dollars a year....the report, written last January, also about an organized effort by some Somalis to "compel" other Somalis to move to Canada for the sole purpose of accessing welfare funds, she said.<sup>97</sup>

The Somali refugees issue provided ammunition to opposition parties both at the federal and provincial levels. The government came under heavy attack from the media and subsequently from the opposition parties for its immigration policies with regard to refugees, particularly Somali refugees. In October of 1993, Liberal Leader Lyn McLeod capitalized on the federal government's report on welfare fraud by Somalis to attack the NDP government. She accused the government of looking the other way as refugees pillaged the social assistance system of Ontario. She even alleged that Somalis were coming to Canada, not because they were genuine refugees, but for abusing its compassion and generosity.<sup>98</sup>

In response to these criticisms of its policies towards Somali refugees, the federal government took a number of steps to put a lid on the Somali issue. First, it put an indefinite hold

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<sup>96</sup> The Ottawa Sun, October 28, (1993), 4.

<sup>97</sup> Ottawa Citizen, October, 28, 1993, B1.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., B1.

on issuing landed papers to Somali refugees, claiming that the Somalis failed to provide sufficient documents to establish their identity. "The requirement for identity documents is an important enforcement measure since identification is necessary to carry out criminal and security checks and to ensure that we keep out people who have committed crimes against humanity."<sup>99</sup>

This is ironic in the sense that most of these Somalis were already deemed convention refugees based on the documents and information they presented to the Canada Immigration and Refugee Board. The government reversed its decision only after it was criticized by the media. The demand by Canada Immigration that Somali refugees provide authentic passports and other identity documents, as a condition for permanent residence, was an impossible one since there was no internationally recognized Somali government to issue these documents. Some Canadians criticized the government's move to introduce stricter new immigration regulations as a whitewash for its failure to deal with the fundamental economic problems of finding scapegoats in vulnerable immigrants, and accused it of playing into the hands of sinister political machinations of the far right and the Quebec separatists.

When things start going sour, when the money is not coming in or, more likely, going right out the back door once you earn it...you look for scapegoats...the first to be hit are the most visible. People of a different skin tone, language or religion. Paranoia grows as towns that used to be so "Canadian" suddenly are subjected to the invasion of "foreigners" with strange dress codes and eating habits....so there emerges rhetoric that gets 52 Reform Party members elected....or hear ultra-separatists in Quebec say things like immigrants, even ones who have become Canadian citizens, should not be allowed to vote in a separation referendum.<sup>100</sup>

The Canadian government acted from political expediency and decided to deny these refugees the status of landed immigrants with total disregard for the negative impact this would

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<sup>99</sup> Citizenship and Immigration, News Release On Undocumented Refugees, (Ottawa, June 1, 1994).

<sup>100</sup> Ottawa Sun, October 15, 1995, 4.

have on future integration and settlement of Somali refugees. This was not the first time that Canadian immigration had caved in under public pressure regarding its refugee policies.

Canadian immigration and refugee policy formulators maintain a precarious balance between public interest groups that seek more liberal immigration policies and those who would like to cut off immigration altogether. Sentiments among the electorate may erupt into anti-refugee feelings if they witness examples of maladjusted refugees or incidents that focus attention on the refugees. Indeed, the arrival on Canada's east coast of a boatload of 154 Tamil refugee claimants in 1986, and another in 1987 of 171 Sikhs, resulted in anti-refugee backlash. These incidents received heavy news coverage, resulting in public accusations that these people were "queue jumping" and "bogus refugees". The negative public response following the Sikh landing precipitated Parliament to recall the members for an emergency session to enact legislation to resolve future "refugee crises"<sup>101</sup>.

These measures, aimed at silencing government critics, severely hindered the integration and settlement process of Somali refugees. Without permanent residence, refugees are not eligible for job-training programs; they cannot sponsor their spouses, children or relatives; and they cannot qualify for student loans. In essence, this was an officially imposed idleness and uncertainty. Some Canadian newspapers took on the apparent contradiction of the government's decision to demand identity documents from Somali refugees and the fact that all these refugees were already deemed as genuine Somalis on the basis of whatever documents or other convincing evidences they presented earlier to the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board.

They were in flight for their lives, with well founded fears of persecution in their own country. But they could not become landed immigrants under the stricter terms of the new law....Many cannot even find self-supporting work in Canada, because employers are understandably wary of their backgrounds- and their future. Fixing the law is a necessity. To condemn true refugees to lives of needless solitude is not fair...there is no government in Somalia to issue documents or authenticate them...after all, everyone of the 9,000 to 10,000 Somalis now in limbo has been approved by Canada's refugee board.<sup>102</sup>

By the provisions of the 1993 Immigration Law Amendments, a new refugee category, referred to as Undocumented Convention Refugees in Canada Class (UCRCC), has been created.

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<sup>101</sup> Robert R. Heipel, "Refugee Resettlement in a Canadian City: An Overview and Assessment" in Refugee Policy: Canada and the United States, ed. by Howard Adelman, ( Toronto, York Lanes Press Ltd., 1991), 346-7.

<sup>102</sup> Ottawa Citizen, Monday, June 15, 1996, B4.

It is important to mention, however, that the amendments to the Immigration Act did not single out Somalis by name. Nevertheless, the only groups affected by them at this time were Somalis, and to a lesser extent, the Afghans. Given the prolonged political turmoil in both Somalia and in Afghanistan, refugees from these countries may not be able to provide authentic identity documents for there does not exist a legitimate authority in either country to issue them in the first place. Besides, Canada Immigration refused to consider other alternative ways of proving one's identity such as affidavits, other family members living in Canada and taking an oath.

Community organizations representing Somali refugees challenged the new immigration law in a federal court (for a copy of this court challenge, see Appendix F), claiming that Canada Immigration violated their rights as defined by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. They demanded the removal of those sections of the new law which specifically dealt with identity documents or that it be amended in such a way as to create room for exceptional cases. The exceptional nature of Somali and Afghan cases was strengthened by the fact that there is no recognized government in either country to issue reliable identity documents.

Secondly, the conservative government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney initiated an investigation into allegations of Somali refugees who held senior positions in the military regime of President Mohamed Siad Barre, claiming some of these refugees misrepresented their background and entered Canada on fake identities.

The investigator said that at a briefing for senior government officials last Dec. 14, 24 Somalis were identified as possibly entering Canada by questionable means. They included former generals, judges and relatives of deposed Somali president Mohamed Siad Barre plus relatives of Aidid and his major fund-raiser. Reports on the problems were written with the names WARF (Welfare Abuse Refugee Fraud)...”<sup>103</sup>

The decision by the government to invoke a section of the Immigration Act that permits it to deport anyone who held a senior position in a government that has a record of human rights

violations, affected Somali refugees in a unique way. The problem here was that the majority of Somali refugees who had jobs in their country had worked for the government. For more than twenty years Somalis lived under the rule of a socialist military regime where the government was the principal employer and the private sector was very much under-developed, consisting mainly of small family run businesses. The Somali community protested against this blanket accusation of their community and an ad-hoc committee, representing different Somali groups, was set up to respond to the government regarding the deportation of some Somali refugees who had worked for the military regime. The committee sent the following letter to the Minister of Immigration asking him to reconsider the government's decision to deport Somalis who had held senior positions in Siad Barre's regime, unless their personal involvement in gross human rights violations could be proven.

In April 1995, at least five persons belonging to the Somali community ...were summarily arrested, detained, and interrogated under s.19(L)(1.1) of the Immigration Act. To the best of our knowledge most of these persons served in a civilian capacity during the reign of the Barre military regime....Honorable Mr. Marchi, the Somali community is one which, to put it mildly, has experienced tragic events during the past few years. A knock on the door in the middle of the night, by uniformed personnel, brings back unpleasant memories to many of us....The blanket application of a flawed immigration law is undermining our struggle to settle down, educate our children, contribute to the well being of our community and the Canadian society at large...We have consulted legal counsel and take the position that s. 19(1)(L)(1.1), violates our community members' rights under the Canadian charter of Rights and Freedoms...Our community which is united on this issue strongly recommends : That this law be amended to avoid and minimize the victimization of innocent people; That there be a moratorium on the enforcement of this law until any amendment is finalized..." (for the full text see appendix D).

Despite this letter and demonstrations by the Somali community, the government refused to reverse its decision on the issue of the identity document requirement for Somali refugees. It insisted that the new amendments to the immigration law did not target any specific group and rejected to put a moratorium on their implementation as the Somali community demanded (see

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<sup>103</sup> Ottawa Sun, Thursday, October 28, 1993, 3.



appendix D and E). Since the Somalis as a group could not exercise any political clout, the government could solve its problem without paying any political price. These measures, aimed at stopping the influx of Somali refugees to Canada and silencing political critics, hindered their integration and settlement process.

With all the allegations of widespread welfare fraud and the smear campaign, the government's investigation discovered only seven Somali refugees who were involved in welfare abuse, and only two were deported for allegedly misrepresenting their identity. All this negative reporting about the Somali community contributed to their feelings of alienation and isolation which added to adjustment and integration obstacles already faced by them.

... The report is based on findings of a very narrow number of cases, about—something like seven individual cases, from which, then this individual has cast a very wide and, I think, very offensive aspersions and conclusions onto the Somali community and—which I think are completely inappropriate and certainly not—not warranted on the basis of the Findings that are in the report.<sup>104</sup>

New immigrants, particularly those from non-preferred countries, have always experienced difficulties in adjusting to Canadian society as a result of racism and discrimination meted out to them by the mainstream. According to Donald H. Avery, every new immigrant group has to undergo a period of initial hostility and discrimination as part of what he termed as a “rite of entry”. Newcomers with cultural traits and racial characteristics that differ from the mainstream culture encounter serious challenges in integrating into the Canadian society, but with the passage of time they gain acceptance and become established.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Tony Silipo, Ontario Provincial Minister of Social Services, interviewed by CBC Radio's Michael Enright on “As It Happens” program, Toronto, October 28, 1993.

<sup>105</sup> Avery, *Reluctant Host*, 217.

## **Chapter 7.**

### **Barriers to settlement and integration**

The process of resettling in a new country is a difficult experience for all immigrants. It is much more so for those who have little to share with the host society in terms of language, education, gender roles, socio-economic structures, religion and life style. Somali refugees, speaking a different language, being Muslims, and looking different, came with a cultural baggage that is visibly different in Canadian society. For Somali refugees, language was the first and most difficult barrier they had to negotiate in their settlement process in Canada. In my survey, 60% of the participants self-assessed their English proficiency level as “good”. Eighty percent of the respondents said they had been in Canada for more than three years, while the remaining twenty percent were in Canada for less than a year. Only 5% of the respondents said they were fluent in English prior to their arrival in Canada.

For immigrants and refugees, acquisition of the host society language is a sine qua non for all other aspects of settlement and integration. “For without at least some fluency in the language of the host society, a refugee is not only handicapped economically, but will be unable to understand the cultural meanings embedded in everyday life”.<sup>106</sup>

The majority of Somali refugees in Ottawa, according to my survey, could speak neither English nor French prior to their arrival in Canada . This is understandable given the fact that in Somalia, neither English nor French is an official language. It should be mentioned, however, that about 5% of Somali refugees in Ottawa came from Djibouti where French is an official language. There is no literature available on whether Somalis from Djibouti had better language skills than those from Somalia proper. There is a relatively large number of francophone Somalis in Ottawa who said they chose to live here because of bilingual services.

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<sup>106</sup> Tadesse Haile, Ethiopian Refugees in Toronto: A Case Study, (Toronto: CANACT, 1989), 34.

This cultural and linguistic difference affected the way the Somalis were received and perceived by the mainstream society. Traditionally, Canada received immigrants from countries with whom it shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The frustration and helplessness experienced by Somali refugees during the first years of settlement in Canada was captured in the following poem composed by a Somali refugee in Ottawa:

- Meel adan afkeedana aqoon ehelna kuu joogin
- Araggaaga meel uu dadkuba la ammakaagaayo
- Meel aan illaah laga aqoon uunka badidiisa
- Meel uu sidi ciid ufo leh baraf ku aasaayo
- Waa meel islaamiyo raggii la is afgaraneyne
- Aqoontaada meel aan larabin abid haddaad joogto
- Meel aad agoon sidi ad tahay cayrtu aqooli
- Wadankii markaan soo ambaday ehelka aan mooday
- Inta adan imaan Canada waa edeg barwaaqaade
- ha yeeshee dhulkii aan ka imid waa allow sahale
- mar haddii iblayskii qaybiil ku amartaagleeyey
- Ummadnimo haddii lagu bedelay aniga reerkayga
- Aqli-qori hadday wada noqdeen idilba Somali
- Ubadka iyo haddii maatiidii gaajo ku idlaatay
- Alleybadaye sow baraf inaan eegto noqon mayso

### Translation

- A place where they speak a different language
  - A place where there is no one related to you
  - A place where you look different from everyone
  - A place where your color invites a stare from passers-by
  - A place where nobody worships God but few
  - A place where there is more snow than sand on the ground
  - A place where wife and husband do not understand each other
  - A place where your knowledge and skills are not needed
  - A place where like orphans you depend on handouts for the indigent
  - Canada, a place more prosperous to hear about than to live in
  - There is uncertainty from where I came, however
  - Somalia is still under the spell of a devil called "Qabiil"- clan
  - Their sense of unity has been replaced with that of clannish interests
  - Their intelligence could only understand killing with guns
  - They have left me with no choice but to shovel snow
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This language handicap placed severe limitations on the capacity of Somali refugees to successfully integrate into Canadian society. Not only were they unable to communicate with the host society, but they could not access their professions and trades. Language barriers affected Somali refugees in both their ability to utilize available services and to participate in the economic and social life of their new home. For example, many Somali refugees had to wait several months for their claims to be processed by the Refugee Board for lack of Somali interpreters. Very few interpreters were available for Somali refugees, particularly those who arrived prior to 1991. “ There were a limited number of Somali speaking interpreters to help us handle Somali refugee cases and sometimes it could be months before we get someone to interpret for our clients.”<sup>107</sup> Delays in the determination of Somali refugee claims meant delays in other aspects of their settlement such as language training, health insurance, and employment.

Service delivery to the Somalis is another area where the language barrier hindered their settlement. Social workers, welcome centres, and other immigrant serving agencies experienced language difficulties in providing services to Somali refugees. Inter-city travel was a problem for many refugees as they could not understand street signs or ask people for directions. Stories abound where refugees missed important appointments such as immigration hearings because they had no one to bring them to where they were supposed to be for the appointments.

While language and culture are not separate entities, rather connected and interwoven, ... the impact of language on the integration of newcomers can be huge... much of the communication difficulties between Somali newcomers and social service providers such as medical staff and teachers can be reduced to language barriers rather than cultural barriers as is often suggested.<sup>108</sup>

In addition to these practical limitations imposed on Somali refugees by the lack of

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<sup>107</sup> Byron Pfeifer, Immigration Lawyer in Ottawa, interview by the author, June 14, 1998.

language proficiency in terms of communicating with their host society, there was also a psychological price to be paid by them. They suffered from isolation, loneliness, and emotional insecurity resulting from this language barrier. For newcomers, not speaking the language of the host community can be extremely isolating. It can damage self-esteem and can also hinder social and cultural integration ... Language barriers also slow or impede learning, make acquiring, or preparing for a job more difficult, and hinder the establishment of important peer relationships.<sup>109</sup> According to one of the Somali refugees I interviewed, lack of knowledge of the host society's language reduces new immigrants to a life of an observer rather than a participant in the society's affairs. "I used to stay in my apartment for days because I was afraid of going out for fear that I may not be able to return to my apartment or get lost in streets and in the many cars. I wished I knew certain sentences in English such as "I need help in getting to the bus station" I could not ask questions. I couldn't shop alone. I could not express my views.... I was just observing things. It was really frustrating."<sup>110</sup>

Language training programs, provided by Canada Immigration, were available for immigrants and refugees. However, restrictive eligibility criteria prevented many Somali refugees from participating in these programs. For example, refugee claimants are excluded from attending Language Instruction for Newcomers (LINC) programs, whereas convention refugees have access to a limited number of programs. Considering that Somali refugees had to wait for about a year for their claims to be heard, access to language training was not always there for them.

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<sup>108</sup> Mark Patton, "Hidden Flames: An Exploration of the Limits of Culture and the Integration Experiences of Somali Newcomers", a paper presented as a partial requirement of the M.A. degree at the Department of Sociology, Carleton University, ( September, 1996 ).

<sup>109</sup> Nancy L.H. Koshmann, "The Resettlement Process of South Asian Refugee Adolescents : Making It American", Doctoral Dissertation, Cornell University, (Michigan: U.M.I. Press, 1987), 86.

<sup>110</sup> Sahra Ali, Somali refugee in Ottawa, interview by author, June 16, 1998.

In addition to restrictive criteria that prevented many Somali refugees from benefiting from these language programs, other factors contributed to the lack of language training opportunities for Somali immigrants. Among these are locations of programs, characteristics of Somali refugees (e.g. some refugee women had to look after their children and had no time to attend ESL classes) and lack of awareness, on the part of Somali refugees, of the existence of the language programs. The level of frustration experienced by Somali refugees due to language barriers is highlighted by the following remarks by a Somali father:

I depend on my 13 year old boy for all daily communications with everyone, the storekeeper, the teller, the police and neighbors. I take him with me to wherever I go and I listen to him. He is practically the father and I'm the teenager. I believe he is now beginning to doubt whether I'm a good role model. <sup>111</sup>

## **Chapter 8.**

### **Social Adaptation**

Somali refugees, who came from a socio-cultural background that is at variance with that of Canadian mainstream society, found adjusting to life in Canada an enormous challenge. They had to undergo a sudden change in all aspects of their life. The process of settlement required them to adopt a new survival mechanism. Socially, Somalis were used to a communal society of extended families where competition and individualism are secondary values to the collective welfare of the group. The impersonal and competitive North American social environment they found themselves in caused anxiety and stress. This cultural incompatibility created obstacles for Somali refugees as they struggled to integrate into Canadian society. The tension and stress resulting from the tendency to retain one's cultural traditions and the need to change under the pressure of the new social environment shattered the lives of many Somali refugees. For example, spousal violence, divorce and separation are very high among Somali refugees, according to two studies by Sylvia and Mohamed N. Ali.<sup>112</sup> This reflects the stress and tension they go through which contributed to the slowing down of their integration into the larger society. In his study Prof. Nuh Ali found that a disproportionate number of Somali teenagers in school are at risk of dropping out of school.

Another characteristic of the Somali community in the Ottawa-Carleton region is the proportion of females to males. An important feature of viable communities is a numerical balance between the sexes. According to Dr. Mohamed Ali's study, there are more ( 65%)

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<sup>111</sup> Mohammed B. Dini, Somali refugee in Ottawa, (interview by the author, Ottawa, June 19, 1998).

<sup>112</sup> Mohamed Nuuh Ali, "Needs Assessment of High Risk Somali Youth in the West End of Ottawa" a study commissioned by Pinecrest-Queensway Community and Health and Services, (Ottawa, August, 1995), 21.

women than men in the Somali community in Ottawa. This unnatural community results from the fact that more men died or are still involved in the Somali civil war than women. Another reason is that women and children are a priority when a decision as to who should go first is to be made. If there is an opportunity to send some members of the family to a safe haven, the wife and children would be the first to take advantage of this opportunity. It is also due to the war induced separation suffered by the victims of the Somali civil strife. This disparity in the composition of male and female members of the Somali community affects their integration capacity. Culturally, Somali men are supposed to be the bread winners and protectors of their families. Gender inequalities in Somalia meant more boys had access to education and professional training than girls. Subsequently, the Somali refugees in Ottawa, the majority of whom are women, have literacy rates lower than usual.

The Somali community has most notably been marked by the large number of women and children...many Somali men are either still fighting in the civil war, missing or dead. The women and children came to Canada seeking refuge from the horrors of the civil war raging in Somalia. These women often choose to settle in Ottawa because of its safe and quiet reputation.<sup>113</sup>

Food was another cultural shock for Somali refugees. Many types of food in Canada are not found in Somalia. For example, factory processed and frozen foods were new to many Somali refugees, particularly those from nomadic areas who produced their own food rather than buy it from supermarkets and sometimes used the barter system instead of money. Those in cities usually bought food directly from farmers in small open bazaars. Principal food items in Somalia are meat (sheep, goat, beef and camel), maize and millet or sorghum. When they came to Canada Somalis were overwhelmed by the variety of foods available in stores and could not find the types of food they were familiar with. As Muslims, Somalis do not eat pork and when buying

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<sup>113</sup>Sylvia Thompson, "Somali Women in Ottawa" thesis presented as a partial requirement for the M.A. degree at the Department of History, Carleton University, (April, 1994 ), 3.



meat needed to read the labels on the food items. This was not possible for those who could not read English or French. Since they were not used to eating frozen or packaged foods, some refugees believed that packaged foods are not pure or have been adulterated.

We used to cook with charcoal and firewood. In Canada all cooking is done by electricity. I never used electricity to cook food before I came to Canada. It was something new to me. I could cook but I did not know how much electricity I needed for different types of food and I could not read the cooking instructions beside the stove... so I had to learn how to use the stove. In Somalia we used to go to the market and talk to the women who are selling their products and we asked them what was the price of that or this item and they told us. But we could refuse their price and tell them how much we were prepared to pay. We could bargain. In Canada, it is different. Nobody will talk to you about the price of things. Everything is written on the products.... And the food here does not taste as good as the food we used to eat. ... I remember getting sick with the food I ate when I first came to Canada and even today, after six years, there are many Canadian foods I have never tasted, but my children want to try everything.<sup>114</sup>

The cold weather was another aspect of Canadian life that Somali refugees had found difficult adapting to. Somalia is a tropical country where the weather is warm throughout the year. The change from all season warm tropical weather to the extreme cold weather of Canada was an unimaginable reality for these refugees. Almost all the respondents in the survey, eighty five percent (85%), mentioned weather as one the most difficult Canadian conditions they had to adjust to. Properly dressing for the weather, walking in snow covered streets and following weather information were all new realities for them. During the winter months, they stayed home except when they had to go school or work because they were not used to participating in winter activities such as skating, skiing and taking a walk. Winter was a complete shock for Somali refugees in Canada.

Furthermore, the carry-over-effects of the civil war in Somalia continued to hinder Somali refugees' adjustment capacities. Separated families, the emotional drain caused by loss of family members and relatives and the general anxiety of the war exacted a heavy toll on Somali

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<sup>114</sup> Sahra Ismael, Somali refugee in Ottawa, interview by author, June 17, 1998.

refugees. In the light of this multitude of difficulties, many Somali refugees found themselves psychologically unprepared to adapt to their new country. "I simply lacked the energy to restart my whole life from scratch. I felt like giving up on life."<sup>115</sup> Recalled an interviewee.

Inextricably, the overpowering reality of exiles merges with the suffering of loss - loss of home and of possessions, loss of status and professional standing, loss of identity and nationality, loss of community, culture and social traditions, and most tragic of all, loss of family.<sup>116</sup>

As the origin of immigrants and refugees changed, so did the reception accorded to them by Canadian mainstream society. Some Somalis believe that their colour and their country of origin gave rise to racism and discrimination. "The fact that we are black, Muslims, and from a third world country living in a developed, Christian, mainly white society makes us so different and a scapegoat for anything that is wrong with Canada."<sup>117</sup> It is essential for positive social adaptation of immigrants and refugees to feel welcome in the host society.

As refugees who were driven out of their homes by events beyond their control and who had lost their economic independence, most Somalis applied for government assistance upon their arrival. This dependency on social assistance contributed to the negative public attitude towards Somalis. They are perceived as unproductive and a drain on Canada's social assistance system. Although Canada has a reputation as a compassionate country that provides a safe haven and receptive environment to immigrants and refugees, many of the people who sought safe-havens in Canada had come from countries which shared cultural similarities with Canada. The name "Somali" was unknown to most Canadians prior to the 1990s and the sudden exodus of refugees from Somalia created concerns about their prospects for integration

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<sup>115</sup> Said Abdi, Somali Refugee in Ottawa, interview by author, May 20, 1998.

<sup>116</sup> Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill and Stacy Churchill, The Pulse of the World: Refugees in our Schools, (Toronto: OISE Press, 1994), 52.

<sup>117</sup> Ladan Affi, Somali Communist Activist, interview by author, Ottawa, May 20, 1998.

For several reasons, Somali refugees experienced tremendous psychological distress. First, by fleeing their homeland, they abandoned not only their familiar physical and social surroundings, but also left behind a social support system that usually includes extended family members. The hysterical departure of refugees meant that they went through extreme emotional stress prior to coming to Canada. Secondly, coming to Canada, a country that shares almost nothing with Somalia, refugees had to make enormous adjustments to their new socio-economic environment. The pressure to learn new languages, job skills, life-style, and values and to fit into a new social role inevitably creates feelings of isolation and anxiety. Many Somali refugees experienced a reduction of their social status and found themselves at the bottom or near the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy of their adopted society. For Somali refugees to achieve the goal of social adaptation, they must first overcome economic and linguistic barriers.

## **Chapter 9.**

### **Employment**

The level of participation, by any group, in the economic life of society as reflected by employment, income category, residential area, and opportunities for promotion, is an indicator of that group's position or status in society. Along with the financial aspects of our lives, employment affects us in many other ways. It affects how we see ourselves and how we are seen by others.<sup>118</sup>

Finding employment in Canada proved one of the most difficult challenges for Somali refugees, particularly during the first four years of their arrival. Those who managed to find jobs had to settle for dead-end-jobs unrelated to their fields of expertise. According to survey participants' responses, 60% of Somali refugees/immigrants in Ottawa were unemployed at the time when this survey was conducted (April 1998-August 1998). In another study carried out by the Centre for Refugee Studies in Toronto in 1995, similar high unemployment (65%) was reported among Somali refugees in that city. The Somali refugee community in Ottawa also displays a high rate of welfare dependency. In order to account for this unusually high unemployment rate among Somali refugees in Ottawa, a number of factors were considered, including occupational and language skills of Somalis prior to coming to Canada, household composition and labour market conditions in Canada at the time of Somali refugees' arrival.

One barrier to the economic adaptation of Somali refugees is the degree to which technological difference exists between the host society and newly arrived immigrants. Somalis came from a pre-industrial society with an under developed economy with rudimentary technological development. Only 30% of the respondents in our survey reported having a

professional occupation in Somalia. Moreover, the technical skills and knowledge possessed by many Somali refugees upon their arrival required upgrading to bring them to Canadian standards. Because of this technological gap, they encountered enormous problems in entering into the Canadian workforce. As newcomers, Somalis also lacked job search skills and strategies such as resume writing, contacting employers through phone calls, newspaper help wanted columns and volunteering.<sup>119</sup> The pace of technological change is so fast that even people in developed countries find it difficult to maintain their professional skills without constant upgrading. Machines are replacing people and many skills are being made obsolete by new and more efficient technologies. Immigrants from non-industrialized Third World countries did not have the opportunity to access the plethora of technical knowledge and skills available to people in developed countries, and when they migrated to developed countries, most of them had to learn new technical skills to participate in the labour market of their adopted societies.

As well as being new to Canada, Somalis were also refugees rather than selected immigrants of choice. Since they had not had the opportunity of pre-migration orientation, like economic and business immigrants, on the Canadian economic system or institutions, they lacked an understanding of how the job market here operates. In terms of economic structure, Somalia's underdeveloped and pre-industrial economy could not produce the repertoire of technical knowledge and skills that are required in North American job markets.

In addition to the deficiency in their technical skills, the competitive spirit and assertiveness characteristic of job-seekers in capitalist economies of the west was missing in these refugees. They lacked the "Put your best foot forward attitude" of North American job search culture. All

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<sup>118</sup> Health and Welfare Canada, "After the door has been opened" A Report by the Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, (Ottawa, 1988), 31.

<sup>119</sup> Halima Ali, Somali Settlement Counselor at Ottawa-Carleton Immigrant Services Organization, interview by author, Ottawa, June 20, 1998.

of these factors combined put Somali refugees in Ottawa at a great disadvantage in terms of finding well-paying jobs. Those who are lucky enough to get jobs work mostly at minimum-wage levels. They work as cleaners, security guards, parking lot attendants, cashiers etc.

Although many Somali refugees were well educated upon arrival in Canada, they were not able to get jobs related to their fields of specialty. Canadian employers do not usually trust the skills of immigrants, particularly those from the Third World, unless their skills are upgraded and certified in Canada. “The relationship between the academic qualifications of Somalis and their employment experience shows that high academic qualifications such as university degrees and diplomas or certificates have not been powerful determinants of participation in the labour force”.<sup>120</sup>

Along with providing for the needs of self and family, work is also status building, connects newcomers to the larger society, promotes self-sufficiency and self-esteem and gives newcomers a general sense that they are moving on with their lives. Finding employment is also important for parents in providing their children with a positive role model which demonstrates that the high expectations that their parents have for them are not unrealistic. According to this survey, the Somali refugees are not faring well in terms of employment. The reasons for this high unemployment among Somali newcomers are complex and, as I mentioned above, can be attributed to a combination of various factors including language barriers, the discrimination, immigration status of Somali refugees, economic recession at the time of their arrival and family related problems such as separated families. The suitable entry of Somali refugees to the labour force is sometimes delayed due to a lack of appropriate training.

In order to bring their skills and knowledge up to Canadian standards, Somali

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<sup>120</sup> Edward Opoku-Dapaah, Somali Refugees In Toronto: A Profile, (Toronto: York University, York Lanes Press, 1993), 52.

refugees/immigrants must be eligible for training programs or go through re-certification procedures where their academic credentials are assessed. This accreditation process starts with the evaluation of original academic credentials presented by refugees/immigrants to appropriate educational institutions. Due to the unplanned and hasty departure from their country, many Somalis were not able to bring their academic credentials with them. Some might have lost their documents during the flight from the Somalia or in refugee camps. And since many of them were not in possession of documented proof of their academic training, work experience or skills, they could not practice their professions or seek certification in their fields of expertise. For lack of document, it became necessary for these refugees to start their academic life from scratch. Referring to the circumstances in which she had to leave her home, one interviewee compared her departure from Somalia with someone escaping from a house on fire. "If you wake up in the middle of the night and you see your house is on fire, would you remember to take your passport with you? Would you have time to go through your cabinet and look for important documents?"<sup>121</sup> Many Somali refugees in Ottawa found themselves in this unique situation where it became impossible for them to practice their skills and knowledge legally. For those who were fortunate enough to have documents, the accreditation bodies and professional unions set up a wall of criteria for entry to trades and professions. Prolonged alienation from the respective occupational environment leads to erosion of skills, loss of technical terminology and diminishing confidence in one's capabilities - all serving to widen the gap between the individual and attainment of their occupational goals. On the other hand, Canadian employers and educational institutions could not accept someone's verbal assertions as proof of their qualifications and had to follow standard procedures with regard to accreditation or prior

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<sup>121</sup> Ebla Jama, Somali Refugee in Ottawa, interview by author, Ottawa, May 20, 1998.

learning assessment of immigrants/refugees.

Canada's official immigration policy requires potential immigrants and refugees to undergo screening and selection processes abroad before admission is granted. Since claimants do not go through the established screening and selection processes prior to their arrival, Canadian authorities cannot determine whether claimants possess sufficient levels of linguistic, educational and occupational preparedness essential for integration into Canadian society."<sup>122</sup>

Another obstacle to employment, as far as Somali refugees are concerned, was their immigration status. Unless they acquire landed immigrant status, refugees are not eligible for federal training programs or other training programs which could upgrade their skills and improve language acquisition. About 15 percent of Somali refugees in Ottawa do not have permanent residence. Canada Immigration, as a result of new amendments to the Immigration Act, refused to provide permanent residence to Somali refugees unless they had authentic documents proving their identity. According to Somali community organizations, the ID requirement is only a red herring for Canada's decision to bar Somalis from entering Canada. In the words of a Somali community activist in Ottawa, the ID requirement is a punishment for Somalis to be in Canada. "To demand passports from a country where there is no authority to issue them, defies all logic. I believe this is another way of saying we don't want you guys. But perhaps that is not politically correct. So the ID issue is a convenient excuse for anti-Somali or anti-immigration groups"<sup>123</sup>.

This lack of permanent residence has placed some Somali refugees in a legal limbo and prevented them from participating in the economic life of Canada. Although Canada Immigration denied that the new immigration law was intended to discourage Somalis from coming to Canada, it is apparent that the ID requirement has had a negative impact on them in

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<sup>122</sup> Edward Opoku-Dapaah, "Integration of Landed Refugee Claimants in Canada: Towards an Explanatory Model" in *Refuge*, 13, No. 9 (February, 1994), 11.

<sup>123</sup> Halima Ali, Somali community activist, interview by author, Ottawa, June 19, 1998.



terms of their economic and social integration.

The Somalis settled in big cities for reasons I have already described, where they had to compete with many other job seekers. They live in inner city clusters, often in government housing compounds where the types of jobs available require highly skilled people. Large family size, as mentioned before, is another characteristic of Somali refugees which did not help them to get jobs. The average family size of Somalis is 6 children.<sup>124</sup> Since refugees and immigrants mostly start working at the minimum wage level, it will not make financial sense for a parent of six or more children to work at minimum wage when social assistance could give them the same amount or in some cases even more than a minimum wage. More often than not the minimum wage jobs do not provide promotions or other benefits and it is a dead end job. There is no incentive for staying in a minimum wage job that does not promise any benefits or promotion no matter how long you hold it. The main reason given by many respondents was that it did not make financial sense. Most refugees opted for training or upgrading courses instead of being employed at minimum wage level. Due to the large family size, the Somali refugee community is very youthful. Many young Somali refugees are attending colleges and universities and will be joining the job market very soon.<sup>125</sup>

Qualified Somali refugees/immigrants are often discriminated against, according to the survey findings, by Canadian employers because of their newcomer status. Employers disguise their discrimination against new immigrants as lack of Canadian experience. To many Somali refugees, this lack of Canadian experience means naked discrimination. This discriminatory treatment of immigrants/refugees discourages them from pursuing their career ambitions and

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<sup>124</sup>Mohamed Nuuh Ali, "Needs Assessment of High Risk Somali Youth, in the West End of Ottawa", a study commissioned by Pinecrest-Queensway Community and Health Services, (Ottawa, August, 1995), 15.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

often results in wasted resources for both immigrants and the Canadian society. It takes extraordinarily motivated immigrants to give up their previous professions and restart a new career. In Canada, immigrants/refugees from technologically underdeveloped third world countries suffer from such a career barrier more than immigrants from the First World.

Added to these difficulties are the economic hardships that Canada faced at the time of the Somali refugee influx. The 1992 recession had affected Somali refugees in two ways. First, they had to compete in seeking employment with other Canadians at a time when there were few jobs available. Secondly, they became easy scapegoats for the economic problems of the country. They were accused as being an economic burden on Canada and contributing to the recession.

Unfortunately, a recessionary time in Canada has created conflict and feelings of antipathy towards the new immigrant group. This coupled with Canadian limited understanding of Africans, let alone Somalis, has provoked hostility towards this group of people, sometimes managing to weaken these normally proud people.<sup>126</sup>

A disproportionate number of Somali refugees who entered the work-force did so through the marginal types of employment with little or no benefits and with low employment standards. Since they may not understand their rights as employees, refugees are also vulnerable to being exploited by employers. They are loathe to complain because they fear losing their jobs. In general, employment patterns of Somalis are limited in range, and females are more restricted than males.

Individuals who are in the labour force are mostly concentrated in the assembly/packaging industries and also in commercial/retailing areas. Somalis are disadvantaged by their work-related background and skills. In addition, Somalis occupy lower occupational positions because of other mechanisms that either devalue their labour-related capabilities or restrict their employment opportunities to certain job ghettos.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup>Sylvia Thompson, "Somali Women in Ottawa" thesis presented as a partial requirement for the M.A. degree at the Department of History, Carleton University, (April, 1994), 12.

<sup>127</sup> Opoku-Dapaah, Somali Refugees in Toronto, 62.

A majority of the participants in the survey said they experienced discriminatory practices such as non-recognition of academic credentials obtained outside of Canada, and prospective employers' insistence on the possession of Canadian experience as basis for employment. The fact that Somali refugees/immigrants stand out, in terms of their cultural, religious and linguistic characteristics, added to the misperception and mistrust of Canadian employers.

The impact of unemployment is not limited to the unemployed individuals. Although unemployment poses a risk of social and economic problems for all people, it appears to have had devastating effects on Somali refugees. The Somali social structure, as discussed in the preceding chapters, assigns differing roles for males and females and because of this different role men and women are supposed to play in society, more men had access to education than women. As a result, there are more educated men, according to the survey, than women in the Somali community in Ottawa. This gender role difference puts Somali women at a greater disadvantage than men in terms of finding jobs. Furthermore, due to the civil war, in which more men were killed or separated from their families, a majority of Somali refugees in Ottawa, as mentioned earlier, are women and children. The Somali refugee community is also youthful, averaging 28 years of age because of large family sizes. Many families are headed by single mothers with little educational background or vocational training. With a large family of an average size of about 6 children, these mothers face enormous challenges in finding employment.

People work in order to make a living. However, in an achievement-oriented society such as Canada's, work also possesses important symbolic value: being a person of worth depends on being a productive, contributing member of society. Because of self-esteem, the way we see ourselves, is a reflection of the way we are perceived by others, people who do not work or cannot work often feel unworthy<sup>128</sup>.

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<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

Family separation is another obstacle in the way to labour integration for Somali refugees. Some families remain separated either because of their immigration status or because one of the parents is still stuck in the Somali civil war.

Somali refugee women have been conditioned by their experience, their subordinate role and dependency on men, to be less assertive. When they are left to fend for themselves, they realize that they do not have the necessary skills to survive in a job market where they could not offer necessary skills.

## **Chapter 10.**

### **Somali Entrepreneurs**

Despite their diverse racial, cultural, geographical, linguistic, and social backgrounds, the histories of many non-charter immigrant groups to Canada display stark similarities in their experiences in dealing with the adjustment problems of the new country and in developing strategies for survival. One of the survival mechanisms employed by these immigrant groups was the establishment of small businesses.

When members of various Canadian ethnic groups tell their story, in its economic aspects it is almost without exception a story of initial hardship, long struggle, and eventual success... racial discrimination was so much a fact of life that it drove the minorities into economic ghettos. Jews tried to live off the trade of other Jews; and Ukrainians, Poles, and Germans tried to live off other Ukrainians, Poles, and Germans. This drive to survive in a prejudice-ridden community produced the rash of small industry and of bootstrap manufacturing that developed ... Small-scale garment factories, glove factories, shoe factories, printing plants, and dress plants proliferated.<sup>129</sup>

In most literature on immigrants and refugees, the challenge of beginning a life in a new country is analogous to starting a business and venturing forth, economically, on one's own. Enterprises owned and operated by immigrants are one of the primary routes for immigrant economic success and eventual social integration in the host society. The literature attributed the immigrants' high rate of business creation to a combination of their social cohesiveness and difficulties they encountered in the broader labor market. The members of a household who are chosen or "self-select themselves to emigrate abroad often have personal characters similar to those of entrepreneurs."<sup>130</sup> According to this explanation, immigrants and refugees, like entrepreneurs, tend to be dynamic risk-takers, especially in early stages of their settlement.

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<sup>129</sup> Jean Burnett and Howard Palmer, Coming Canadians: An Introduction to a History of of Canada's Peoples, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988), 67-77.

<sup>130</sup> Chan Moris, "Immigrant Entrepreneurs" in Research Perspectives on Migration, No.2 (January-February 1997), 1

Unable to penetrate the structural and cultural barriers of their adopted societies, immigrants and refugees often seek other means to achieve upward social mobility or even more importantly to survive.

The disadvantages and discrimination faced by ethnic immigrants, including refugees, ... force them to seek an alternative to the general mainstream labour market, which is the small ethnic business. The thrust of the thesis is that the societal context in which ethnic minorities operate limits their social and economic opportunities, while at the same time the absence of competition from the dominant group in certain business niches channel minorities into such entrepreneurship as a means of economic survival<sup>131</sup>

While there may be some validity to the argument that immigrants and refugees display more entrepreneurial drive than the native-born, it does not hold true for all immigrant groups. There are variations among the different immigrant groups in terms of socio-economic and geographical conditions that apply to any specific group. Immigrant entrepreneurs often look for a market niche where small business could thrive. In industries like garments, restaurants, petty retailing, taxis and so on, newcomers found a supportive environment in which entrepreneurial activity has flourished.<sup>132</sup>

Although Somali refugees had, within their ranks, a class of entrepreneurs, traders and business people who have skills and experience to be self-employed, they had neither the capital nor the knowledge and experience of the Canadian economic system. Since they faced enormous constraints in their attempts to find meaningful employment, some Somalis in Ottawa pursued entrepreneurial activities, both as a means to achieve economic independence and, therefore, social status and as a mechanism for survival in an economically uncertain environment. Like other ethnic groups, Somali entrepreneurs are found in small-scale business enclaves such as

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<sup>131</sup>Steven Gold, "The Employment Potential of Refugee Entrepreneurship: Soviet Jews and Vietnamese in Southern California." Washington DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Division of Immigration Policy and Research, International Labor Affairs bureau (September 1988), 57.

<sup>132</sup>Roger Windinger, Howard Aldrich, and Robin Ward, Ethnic Entrepreneurs: Immigrant Businesses in Industrial Societies, (Newbury Park: Sage Publications Inc., 1990), 19.

restaurants, convenience stores, and other retail services catering mainly to the tastes of Somali customers. Those who had previous trade and business experiences, and were able to raise enough capital, have set up ethnic grocery shops, auto repair shops, souvenir/jewelry shops, travel agencies, restaurants and convenience stores. As Somali cultural and traditional practices are emphasized, they attract a sizable proportion of the refugee Somali population. For entrepreneurs who provide the goods and services associated with these traditions and practices, the economic environment appears to have facilitated the integration of cultural traditions and past experiences with the demands of the present. As Somalis become established, it is likely that self-employment will become a major economic activity in the Somali community and will help it move towards integration and economic independence.

However, in their attempt to start small businesses in Ottawa, Somali entrepreneurs encountered enormous financial constraints as well as unfavorable market conditions. Groups can work only with the resources made available to them by their environments, and the structure of opportunities is constantly changing in modern industrial societies. Market conditions may provide ethnic entrepreneurs with opportunities to set up their own businesses or may prevent them from engaging in small businesses.<sup>133</sup> Another pre-condition to the creation of ethnic businesses is the existence of ethnic neighborhoods whose needs are not well served or abandoned by the large-scale mainstream business corporations.<sup>134</sup> The majority of Somali refugees came to Canada in the early 1990s when the country was suffering from a deep recession and when the market conditions were not easy even for Canadian businesses to survive the recession, much less so for refugee Somali entrepreneurs to start businesses. Furthermore,

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<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

due to the residential distribution of the Somali refugees in different parts of Ottawa, Somali neighborhoods are not large enough to support many of their own businesses, not to mention the relatively weak purchasing power of the Somali community.

Another disadvantage for Somali entrepreneurs is that they did not (do not) have, like some other ethnic entrepreneurs, the opportunity to play the role of a middleman between their former homeland and Canada due to the geographical divide and lack of business links between Somalia and Canada.

The businesses that provide cultural products—newspapers, recordings, books, magazines, clothes, jewelry—are also quick to find a niche in the immigrant community ...the important point is that they involve a direct connection with the immigrants' homeland and knowledge of tastes and buying preferences... the business of specializing in the problems of immigrant adjustment is another early avenue of economic activity of ... ethnic entrepreneurs<sup>135</sup>

The existing Somali businesses draw their clients mostly from the Somali community which means the potential for growth or even sustainability is limited because the Somali clientele cannot provide sufficient purchasing power. For Somali enterprises to succeed and grow beyond the confines of their community, non-Somali clients must be secured. At the present, Somalis provide the consumer base to which these entrepreneurs sell. But due to their impoverished state, Somali customers can provide limited support even if they patronize their fellow Somali businesses.

The majority of businesses owned by Somalis in Ottawa are restaurants and convenience stores. There are four convenience stores, (better known as Hilib Halaal shops- Hilib Halaal means meat from animals slaughtered according to the Islamic rules) and two restaurants owned and operated by Somalis. Understandably, these businesses are located in those parts of the city with Somali refugees/immigrants concentration such as the Bayshore Shopping Centre and

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.



Elmavale Shopping Centre.(see the map for clusters of Somali neighborhoods). In establishing these businesses, Somali entrepreneurs enlisted the labour of family members or close relatives and friends, working long hours with flexible wages.

Ethnic entrepreneurs rely heavily upon family, kin, and coethnics for the cheap, loyal labor essential for their survival and success... family labor is largely unpaid, and relatives and coethnics, while not always paid excessively low wages, are prepared to work longer hours and at times that outsiders find unacceptable... few successful ethnic businesses are sustained without the labor of at least two family members.<sup>136</sup>

An area where Somali entrepreneurs showed some ingenuity and success is in the area of money transfer. Since the collapse of the Somali government, all other institutions, including financial institutions, ceased to function. This chaos created a vacuum of service in financial transactions in Somalia and some refugees realized the need to fill in this vacuum. Without financial institutions operating in Somalia, some modus vivendi had to be created to carry out the flow of money into or out of Somalia. Some Somalis in the diaspora came up with an innovative system to address this lack of service in monetary transactions in Somalia by setting up a network of representatives in different countries.

Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of Somalis living in foreign countries wanted to send money to their families and relatives back in Somalia. Some Somalis identified this need early on and created a network of representatives in almost every Somali town and region. Taking advantage of the extended family connections and their knowledge of the clan system, these entrepreneurs were able to transfer money to virtually all corners of Somalia.<sup>137</sup> In addition to their ability to get money to remote parts of Somalia, they also charge their clients much less than the banks do. Even Somalis who want to send money to other countries where there are

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<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 141-142.

<sup>137</sup> Abdinashir Hashi, Manager, Al-Amal Money Transferring Agency in Ottawa, interview by the author, Ottawa, July 15, 1999.

banks go through the Somali money transfer networks (SMTN) because they offer much cheaper rates.

Initially, there were many Somali groups involved in the money transfer business. But, like any other business ventures, some emerged successful while others failed. There are three major Somali money transfer agencies in Ottawa namely: Al-barakaat, which is strong in Southern Somalia, particularly in Mogadishu and surrounding areas, has an office at Bayshore Shopping Center in the west-end; Al-Amal, which mainly serves clients from central, south-western and north-eastern parts of Somalia, has an office in the east-end of Ottawa at Elmvale Shopping Centre; and Dahab-shiil, which draws its clients mostly from Somalis from northern Somalia, is located on Richmond road near the Ottawa Mosque in the west-end. Despite their use of unorthodox means of sending money, these networks proved to be highly effective in transferring money to places where no other institution could do it and in less time. Prior to the collapse of the Somali government in January 1991, money remittance was a major source of income for many Somalis whose family members or relatives worked in foreign countries, particularly in the Arabian Golf States. The success of this money transfer enterprise is partly due to the absence of competition.

The method Somalis employ to send money from Canada to Somalia or to other countries is rather simple and is principally dependent on the trust these entrepreneurs have established with their Somali clientele. An individual who wants to send money to his/her relatives in Somalia deposits the money with the office of one of these money transfer agencies in Ottawa. The money transferring agent in Ottawa then sends the money first to one of Somalia's neighbor countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia or Djibouti where another representative takes the money and sends it to Somalia, some times by truck. The agent also contacts, through phone or fax, their

branch in the city or town in Somalia where the money is being sent and informs it of the transfer. While the money is being transferred through different countries and by different people, the intended recipient gets his/her money in advance from the agency's representative within hours or not more than forty-eight hours. The representative in Somalia contacts the intended recipient by using the information provided by the sender. The individual sending the money furnishes the money transfer agent with information about the person he/she wants to receive the money.

“The success of our money transferring businesses depends not only on the trust we have established over the years with our clients, but also on our ability to get money to all parts of Somalia....cities, towns and remote nomadic areas where nobody else could set foot on... ..we also help people contact their relatives and friends by allowing them to use our communication system--telephones, faxes for free or for nominal fees....we sometimes function like a relief agency....all these helped us attract clients and grow....our agency has 155 branches in different countries and we are still expanding....<sup>138</sup>

The clan system in Somalia is so effective in identifying individuals that when sending or receiving money, clients are not asked to provide their ID documents such as social insurance numbers. Money transfer agents ask clients the clan of recipients in lieu of identity documents because in Somalia your clan is your identity. Fees for sending money through these agencies depends on where in Somalia the money is to be sent, ranging from 3% for big cities to 5% for small remote areas.<sup>139</sup> One of the problems faced by the clients using these informal money transfer agencies is that their transaction is not recognized by Canadian financial institutions or by Revenue Canada. For example, if a Somali man sends money to his wife and children in Somalia to support his family, he can not claim credit on this money when he is filing his tax.

Despite their informal business activities, Somali Money Transferring Agencies (SMTA) became viable enterprises which provide employment and income to some Somalis. They are

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

beneficiaries of the unique opportunity provided by the prolonged political and economic chaos in Somalia. The three money transfer agencies in Ottawa employ 15 persons. No data is available on the business transactions of these enterprises and there is no way to determine how much profit they make from their businesses for these entrepreneurs are rather reluctant to disclose their financial positions. However, they admit that they make a good profit and judging by the volume of the transactions (\$6 million in 12 months), we can conclude that these enterprises are very profitable.

In addition to transferring money to Somalia and other countries, these entrepreneurs are also involved in some other side businesses such as telephone lines and cultural products including recordings and clothes.<sup>140</sup> The success of the money transfer agencies is partly due to their low start-up costs. But they also require someone with extensive knowledge about Somali culture as well as connections in other countries. These businesses could benefit from government assistance in the form of writing business plans, keeping account books, conducting feasibility studies and getting loans; however, the very assistance may entail some problems for these entrepreneurs. For instance, the regulations and licensing requirements may discourage entrepreneurs who may not meet these requirements. Another example is the issue of immigration status, because some Somalis who are not permanent residents in Canada are not allowed to operate a business.

Three factors contributed to the development and success of these networks: first, the collapse of the financial institutions in Somalia created a service vacuum in the area of money transaction and transfer. Secondly, given the security situation in Somalia, it was too risky for international financial institutions to venture into the Somalia market. The existence of such a business opportunity encouraged some Somalis to explore ways to take advantage of it. Third,

the absence of competition or other businesses catering to this market was another incentive for those who wanted to provide this service.

Compared to other ethnic entrepreneurs, Somali entrepreneurs face other limitations in their attempts to engage in small business activities in Ottawa. Ethnic entrepreneurs, for instance from Asia, have the opportunity of importing products from their former home countries where they may have links.<sup>140</sup> Many immigrant groups in Canada carry out import/export businesses with their former countries of residence. Somali refugees, due to the political conflict in their country and the geographical distance between Somalia and Canada, do not have this opportunity. Nor did they come with money to start their own businesses in Canada.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich, Immigrant Entrepreneurs, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 126.

## **Chapter 11.**

### **Racial Discrimination as a Barrier to Employment and Integration.**

Job discrimination is among the serious problems that members of an ethnic group may face. It is an important aspect of the instrumental incorporation of persons in a society. It may be experienced by individuals or one may perceive it as a problem without having personally experienced it.<sup>142</sup>

In exploring the reasons why a high percentage of Somalis in the Ottawa-Carleton region are unemployed, a number of factors were looked at including the perception of Somali refugees/immigrants regarding the causes of their high unemployment. As newcomers, Somalis would be vulnerable to racial discrimination by employers due to their distinctive cultural background and newcomer status. The fact that they are new to Canada provides a powerful pretext for employers to discriminate against them on the basis of their lack of Canadian experience. In addition to the several conventional sources of stereotypes such as racial origin, skin color and religion, Somalis suffer from a distinctive cultural background. Being a member of a minority group and being a Black alone puts them in a disadvantaged position in the Canadian society in terms of finding gainful employment.

There is a perception on the part of Canadian employers that third world work experience is not reliable or is useless. It is a perception that shapes the reality of employment in this country... let me give you an example, the chief pilot of Somali airlines who was trained in France and Germany with 15 years of experience and who flew an airbus to Ottawa in 1986 was not allowed to fly a two-seated Cessna.....<sup>143</sup>

Regarding their perception of why they are not employed, a slight majority of the respondents, 53 percent of them, believed that racism is a factor in their unemployment, while

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<sup>142</sup> Jeffrey G. Reitz, "Ethnic Concentrations in Labour Markets and Their Implications for Ethnic Inequality", in Ethnic Identity and Equality: Varieties of Experience in a Canadian City, ed. by Raymond Breton et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 162.

<sup>143</sup> Hamdi Mohamed, "Beyond Settlement: Employment Barriers of Somali Refugees in Ottawa-Carleton." A Study commissioned by Somali Centre for Youth Women and Community Development, June 1998.

the remaining 47 percent of the respondents in my survey reported that other factors such as lack of skills and education and lack of jobs in the Ottawa area prevented them from getting jobs. According to the majority of the participants in my survey, racism or the perception of racism manifests itself in many forms. It is masked as lack of experience, perceived incompetence and protecting efficiency and quality. Somalis, as immigrants and refugees from non-western countries, have the burden of proof when it comes to competition for jobs. They may not even be given the opportunity to do so, however.

Commentators who have been quick to castigate the Somali community over the level of their participation in the labor force or their utilization of public assistance should be made more cognizant of the socio-cultural, racial and institutional barriers that the Somalis confront with respect to employment”<sup>144</sup>

Many Somali professionals who upgraded their academic credentials in Canada could not find jobs. The problem with Somali professionals in terms of getting employment was that more than 60 percent of those who had jobs prior to coming to Canada had white collar jobs. For instance, someone who had worked in Somalia as a judge or a lawyer stands very little or no chance of getting the same job in Canada. Those who had blue color jobs in Somalia are also disadvantaged in the face of performance-oriented employers who view the skills and experience of Third World immigrants with suspicion and are reluctant to hire these newcomers unless they upgrade or retrain in Canada. Judging by their reported occupations, a small percent of Somalis had technical skills that could be immediately utilized by employers without retraining. The issue is the transferability of skills which apparently became a convenient excuse for Canadian employers to discriminate against newcomer immigrants in their hiring practices. Many Somali professionals received their training in foreign countries such as the US, UK, France, and Germany. Nevertheless, their credentials were not recognized by Canadian educational and

professional institutions. As one interviewee put, there is more than academic credentials involved:

The question of credentials or qualifications is irrelevant...I received most of my education in the UK and in the USA... yet nobody is accepting them... what do you call this? I believe if my color was different, it might influence these employers to consider my education and experience... many employers are blinded by their prejudice and stereotypes about immigrants from Africa..... you cannot convince them that these people can perform as good as anyone else... it is a reality we have to face"<sup>145</sup>

Given the many professionals (25% in my survey) among the Somalis in Ottawa, some of whom upgraded their qualifications or attended retraining programs here in Canada, it is difficult to dismiss their claim of racial discrimination in terms of getting meaningful employment. The level of overt racism might have declined in Canada over the years, but hidden or undetectable racism exists in Canadian society. It is inherently woven into the fabric of most social and professional institutions. These institutions, academic, professional, social, and political, control the mechanisms by which the different segments of society develop, interact and grow. They operate as filters of economic and social developments and determine the roles each segment has to play.

Polite forms of discrimination are certainly in evidence, and may be reflected in the refusal to hire or promote racial minorities in the workplace for one reason or the other. Decision is not overtly discriminatory, but phrased in a matter consistent with abstract principles of justice, equality or fair play ('we treat everybody alike').<sup>146</sup>

Institutional racism, according to a study conducted by the Somali Centre for Youth, Women and Community Development, is the most subtle and harmful barrier to gainful employment of Somalis in Ottawa.<sup>147</sup> Although it may not be deliberate or explicit, it is embedded in

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<sup>144</sup> Edward Opoku-Dapaah, *Somali Refugees in Toronto: A Profile*, (Toronto: York University, York Lanes Press, 1993), 44.

<sup>145</sup>Hussein Ali, Somali refugee in Ottawa, interview by the author, June 18, 1998.

<sup>146</sup> Augie Fleras, "Media and Minorities in a Post-Multicultural Society: Overview and Appraisal" in *Ethnicity and Culture in Canada* ed. by J.W. Berry and J.A. Laponce (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994), 277.

<sup>147</sup>Mohamed, "Beyond Settlement", 15.



organizational procedures and policies that adversely affect minority people. Place of education, for instance, seems to have little or no impact on employment chances of Somali refugees. A large number of Somali refugees in Ottawa said they had encountered racism when looking for employment. It appears that the Somalis, due to their distinctive socio-economic and religious background and due to the fact that they are new arrivals in Canada, are vulnerable to racial discrimination. Job discrimination is one of the main barriers immigrants of color face as they struggle to integrate into Canadian society.

Some immigrants of colour have also been forced to accept jobs below their educational level because of discrimination and because of the difficulty of having their qualifications accepted by Canadian professional organizations. In recent years, Canada's commitment to multiculturalism and human rights has helped reduce the level of overtly racist employment practices, but more subtle discrimination still remains. Canadian society has also remained susceptible to negative stereotypes of certain ethnic groups, and in some instances these stereotypes have been reinforced by the police and the media.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Donald H. Avery, Reluctant Host: Canada's Response to Immigrant Workers, 1896-1994, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1994), 165.

## **Chapter 12.**

### **Somali Community Organizations in Ottawa:**

The founding of ethnic organizations is determined by many conditions, chief among which are group size, geographical distribution of the group, a pressing need for the creation of an organization and the willingness of the group to support it. Somali refugees/immigrants in Ottawa met most of these requirements. More than 7000<sup>149</sup> Somalis live in Ottawa and they are facing many settlement-related problems which call for strong community organization. Such organizations could play a vital role in the process of settlement and adaptation for new immigrants and refugees by providing a link between the host society and the new immigrant community. They also assist mainstream settlement agencies in addressing the settlement and integration needs of new immigrants and refugees.

Soon after immigration, many peoples establish associations to meet wants related to settlement in the new country. These wants include services and information, and, perhaps most important, contact with others of their own language and background. Later, the immigrant associations may be supplemented or supplanted by ethnic associations, to meet wants that are shared by members of an ethnic groups but not by the community at large. These objectives include the perpetuation of a particular language and culture, or needs that members of the ethnic group are prevented from meeting within the existing voluntary associations by linguistic barriers, discrimination, high fees, or other obstacles. The initiative in starting the association may be taken by individuals eager to rise to or to preserve white-collar status in their new country by serving an immigrant or ethnic clientele. With time, however, the appeal of ethnic associations often diminishes, especially for those whose principal occupational institutions come to lie outside the ethnic framework.<sup>150</sup>

In the early 1990s, Somali refugees in Ottawa reached the critical mass needed to establish their own community organization and some Somali community activists and leaders, recognizing the need to mobilize community resources, began to take steps to organize the

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<sup>149</sup> Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Population, Population Statistics Section, Nation's Series C.D. Rom, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, catalogue no. 93, F0020XCB-004, (Ottawa, September, 1998).

community. However, this was a time when the civil war in Somalia was at its peak and Somalis were divided along clan lines and supported different political groups in Somalia. Given the political situation in their country, it was only natural that antagonism and rivalry would develop among Somali refugee groups in Ottawa. Although the need to establish a community organization was pressing, Community leaders who began the process of organizing the Somali refugees in Ottawa found it impossible to unite them into a single community organization. Unfortunately, rival tribal groups, still operating from the mindset of traditional feuds among them, failed to form a single community organization, just as they failed to form a national government back home, and continued to import clan politics from Somalia. The absence of an effective united community organization contributed to the slow pace of integration of Somali refugees in Canada.

Despite their disunity, a number of Somali community organizations were born out of the influx of Somali refugees into Ottawa in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Eight Somali community organizations were formed in the Ottawa-Carleton region over a period of five years (see the list in the appendix). The majority of these organizations, however, existed only in name and did not provide any services to the community, and their significance lies in indicating the divisiveness of the Somali refugee community. For some, concern for their particular clan or region led to the establishment of the organization rather than a commitment to help their compatriots in Canada.

The following six Somali community organizations were those which were involved in the provision of services and achieved a degree of success in assisting refugees in the early years of

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<sup>150</sup> Jean Burnet and Howard Palmer, *Coming Canadians: An Introduction to a History of Canada's Peoples*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988), 185.

their arrival and settlement in Canada. The name and address of each organization is followed by the date of its formation.

1. **Somali Canadian Youth Society (SCYS), 219 Argyle St. (1991)**

This was the first Somali Community Organization to be set up in Ottawa in 1991 by a group of Somali University Students Association members (SUSA) and Somali youth activists. Founders of this community organization came from different groups or clans and were not associated with any specific clan or region. Members of the student group who took an active part in establishing this community organization included: Abdirahman Moalin, from McGill University (President), Omar Ofleh, from the University of Ottawa (Vice President), Mubarak Maah, from the University Ottawa (Secretary), Deka Farah, from Carleton University, Rashid Farah, from Carleton University, Kenadid Hassan, from the University Ottawa University, Idil Salah, from Carleton University, and Muna Abdi, from Carleton University.

The youth group was not structured as an organization, but consisted of youth who were concerned about the Somali refugee issues. They included: Ladan Affi, Ali Abdi, Eid Bedel, Mahad Awad, and Mustafa Omar.

The formation of this organization coincided with the arrival of a large influx of Somali refugees in Ottawa. However, their mandate or area of focus did not include providing settlement services for immigrants such as counseling, language programs and translation. SCYS mainly dealt with Somali refugee youth issues, organizing such activities as sports tournaments, camping and dealing with inter-generational conflicts and mentoring. The first Board of Directors for the Somali Canadian Youth Society consisted of the following: Mubarak Maah, President, Idil Salah, Vice President, Ladan Affi, Secretary, Hamdi Sheikh Mohamed, Mahad Awad, Muna Abdi, and Fadumo Mohamed.

SCYS was one of the more effective Somali community organizations and enjoyed a cross section of community support. This was partly because its image was not colored by clanishness and partly because it delivered important services to the community, particularly to the youth. Among its accomplishments was the sponsoring of a Somali National Week Conference in Ottawa in June 1992 and 1993.

2. **Somali Association of North America (SANA)**, 2750 Cederwood Dr. (1991).

SANA was established in 1991 by a group of mostly religious leaders with the aim of creating an umbrella organization that represents various groups in the Somali community in Ottawa. Within this group, there were two subgroups representing two opposing religious denominations which favored different approaches in dealing with community issues. One of them, Al-Itihad Al-Islam (Islamic Unity) followed orthodox religious ideologies (salafi) and held that integration of Somalis into Canadian society is a threat to their religion and culture. The Other group, Al-Aslaah, supported integration and argued that they should participate in the process of integration.<sup>151</sup> Among the important leaders of the first group were Sheikh Mohamed Rashid, one of the most prominent religious leader in the Somali community in North America who later broke ranks with both groups and set up his own group, Dar-Al- Sunnah; Mohamed Mataan, Abdirisak Warsame, the Principal of the Islamic School in Ottawa; and Abdinaasir Hashi. Representing the other group, Al-Aslaah, were Mohamed Omar Aidid, Said Ali, Fathudin Mohamed and Mohamed Fiqi. Some Somalis claimed to be members of both Al-Itihad and Al-Aslah.

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<sup>151</sup> Jama Ibrahim, Somali Refugee in Ottawa and a former member of Somali Association of North America – (SANA) from 1991-1992., interview by the author, July 21, 1999.

Members of Al-Itihad group accused SANA of being an umbrella organization for many Muslim groups in North America and therefore, could not serve the needs of Somali refugees in Ottawa. They demanded that SANA change its name or they would go it alone.<sup>152</sup>

After many attempts by the representatives of the two groups to find common grounds to work together failed, SANA split into two groups. One group, led by Al-Aslaah, retained the original name, SANA, and the other group became the Somali Canadian Cultural Association (SCCA).<sup>153</sup> Both groups were actively involved in the political drama of Somalia and were seen by the community as branches of parent religious and/or political organizations in Somalia and tended to support specific factions either on the basis of clan or shared religious ideology.

Initially the Somali Canadian Cultural Association (SCCA) became very effective in rallying the support and acceptance of the community. It provided much-needed services such as opening Dugsi Quraan (Evening and weekend schools where children and young people are taught the Koran and Islamic values), it organized Halaqas (a gathering where a religious authority (Sheikh) delivers a sermon on various topics), it set up heritage language classes, counseled and mediated family disputes and made funeral arrangements. It particularly attracted Somali refugee parents who were having difficulties in raising their children in a new culture.

Despite this initial success in helping the community, some of SCCA's policies and views towards integration of Somali refugees into Canadian society were self-defeating. For example, it rejected western values and lifestyles and encouraged people to return to Somalia. It became pre-occupied with religious and political issues in Somalia rather than dealing with the pressing

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<sup>152</sup> Mohamed Hadi, President, Somali Centre for Family Services and Former President, Somali Canadian Cultural Association (SCCA), interview by author, Ottawa, July 23, 199.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

settlement needs of the Somali refugee community in Ottawa.<sup>154</sup> Another strategy that damaged the reputation of this organization was its aggressive fundraising campaigns designed to get financial support for their organization as well as for the members of their religious movement in Somalia. Many community members became suspicious about the constant fundraising activities of SCCA and withdrew their support.<sup>155</sup> There was also a scandal involving one of SCCA's board members. It was alleged that \$10,000 was raised for a particular project and was entrusted with a SCCA board member, but the money disappeared and the individual who had the money had left Canada. Although SCCA recruited members from different regions and clans, there was a perception that the Darod clan members dominated the organization. The first SCCA board members were: Mohamed Hadi, President, Mohamed Hagi Aden, Vice President, Farah Matan, Farah Aw-Osman, Zeinab Ahmed, Abdulkadir Mohamud, and Burhan Jama, as members.

As a result of its religious zealotry, its preoccupation with Somali politics and division within its ranks, SCCA lost its prominence in the Somali community in Ottawa, but continued to exist in name until 1996 when it changed both its name and focus. The new name was Somali Centre for Family Services (SCFS). With a new secular leadership and a clear focus on the needs and problems of the Somali refugee community in Canada, SCFS, in partnership with Jewish Family Services, proved to be very effective organization. It provided and still provides a variety of services including family counseling, immigration related information, translation services, and working with the police on community-related issues.<sup>156</sup>

The other group, Somali Association of North America, SANA, (The Al-Aslaah group) continued to function as a separate organization from the Somali Canadian Cultural Association

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<sup>154</sup> Jama Ibrahim, Former President, Somali Canadian Youth Society, interview by the author, Ottawa, July 22, 1999.

<sup>155</sup> Abdi Hersi, Former Secretary, Somali Canadian Youth Society, interview by the author, Ottawa, July 11, 1999.

<sup>156</sup> Abdirrisak Karod, Executive Director, Somali Centre for Family Services, interview by author, July 23, 1999.

(SCCA) after the split. It provided services similar to those of SCCA. Moreover, it actively advocated positive integration of Somalis into Canadian society, while maintaining their religious and cultural heritage. It worked with the Canadian mainstream community organizations and organized cultural sensitivity workshops for mainstream community workers. SANA was weakened, however, by the same problems as the SCCA. In 1996 SANA, along with another eight Somali community organizations, agreed to amalgamate and formed one organization, the Somali Centre for Youth, Women and Community Development (SCYWCD).

SANA's Al-Aslaah wing first board members included: Mohamed Omar Aidid, President, Said Ali, Vice President, Fathudin Momahed, Secretary, and Mohamed Dahir and Abdulkadir Mohamoud, as members.

### **3. Somali Integration and Settlement Agency (SISA), 1061 Merivale road (1993)**

SISA was founded in 1993 by a group of Somali community activists, mainly from the Northwestern region of Somalia, now the unrecognized breakaway Somaliland Republic. As for its program focus, SISA, like other Somali community organizations, provided settlement-related services including family counseling, cultural interpretation, organizing sports and cultural events. Although SISA claimed in its brochures and policy statements that it provided services to all Somali refugees in Ottawa, by virtue of being from one region, it suffered from self-imposed isolation and was perceived by some Somali refugees from other parts of Somalia as representing a specific constituency.<sup>157</sup> SISA was one of eight Somali community organizations which agreed to disband and amalgamated into a single community organization, Somali Centre for Youth, Women and Community Development (SCYWCD), in the summer of 1996. The first board

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<sup>157</sup> Ahmed Abdi Hashi, Former Director, Ministry of Higher Education, Somalia, and a community activist, interview by the author, Ottawa, July 18, 1999.



members of SISA were: Ahmed Said, President, Suleyman Weirah, Vice President, Ahmed Qabil, Abdirahman Koosar, and Zamzam Adam as members.

**4. Communaute Djibouto-Somalie Francophone(CDSF), 1791 St. Laurent Blvd. (1993).**

As mentioned earlier, a significant number of Somalis in Ottawa are francophone. They came from the Republic of Djibouti, a tiny one-city state on the Red Sea Coast and a former French colony which borders Somalia on the northwest. The majority of the population in Djibouti speaks Somali, but the official language is still French. Somali Francophones came to Canada at the same time as refugees from Somalia proper. Communaute Djibouto-Somalie Francophone was set up by community activists from among Francophone Somalis to address the needs of their distinct community.

Communaute Djibouto-Somalie Francophone provided typical settlement services and programs, such as interpretation services, organizing cultural and sports events, job training programs, and mediating between community and mainstream institutions, including the police and the Francophone school system.<sup>158</sup> Community solidarity is stronger among francophone Somalis than in the non-francophone Somali community. CDSF was one of the eight Somali community organizations which amalgamated to form a single organization in 1996. The first Board of Directors for Communaute Djibouto-Somalie Francophone were: Farha Hassan, President, Ismail Yusuf, Vice President, with Abdiasis Farah, Neinab Moahmed, and Sharmarke Ahmed, as members.

The multiplicity of Somali community organizations reflects the political and social conflicts in Somalia. As refugees who fled from political instability in their country, Somalis brought with them some of the divisions and mistrust that characterized the political reality back

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<sup>158</sup> Farha Hassan, Former President, Communaute Djibouti-Somalie Francophone, interview by author, Ottawa, July 3, 1998.

home. This is a feature of most political refugees who, after they ensure their own security by seeking asylum in neutral countries, tend to reproduce in their asylum countries the political conditions of their home countries.

Immigration itself does not give rise to ethnic conflicts. However, long-standing and continuing ethnic conflicts from the immigrants' homeland may spill over into immigrant-and-refugee receiving societies through networks connecting them with the countries of origin, which are facilitated by modern mass communication and transportation"<sup>159</sup>

There are two factors which precipitated the formation of Somali community organizations: the first is the settlement and acculturation difficulties faced by the newly-arrived Somali refugees in Ottawa. As the number of Somali refugees increased dramatically, their special needs were not adequately met by the mainstream settlement agencies and by other charity organizations. As a survival mechanism, politically active members of the community felt the need to form their own community organizations to address their unique settlement needs.

Another precipitating factor in the formation of Somali community organizations was the desire to retain their cultural and religious identity. The new socio-economic and religious environment in which they were settling threatened their identity and put pressure on Somali refugees to preserve their cultural and religious heritage by setting up their own community centers and communication networks. By 1990 Somali refugees/immigrants in Ottawa reached the critical mass needed to set up their own community organization, but it was not until 1991 when the first Somali community organization was formed.

Somali community leaders who attempted to form charitable community organizations ran into a number of problems that they had to resolve in order to succeed in their efforts to establish community organizations. Among these problems was the suspicion on the part of Somalis about

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<sup>159</sup> A.H. Richmond, The Context of Refugee Resettlement: Refugees and Racism in Canada, (Toronto: Centre for Refugee Studies, York University, York Lanes, 1989), 16.

any public institutions or official bodies. Due to their negative experiences with government institutions and the corruption and repression that was associated with all agencies and institutions run by government officials, Somali refugees were reluctant to support community organizations. For them institutions do not exist for the welfare of the general public. Rather, they exist for repression and for the promotion of those who run them.<sup>160</sup> This negative experience with institutions resulted in the loss of trust, on the part of Somalis, of all public institutions. When people need something from a public office, they either have to bribe the officials there or find an informal connection, such as a clan member who knows these officials to approach them on their behalf.<sup>161</sup> Such mistrust was reinforced by the fact that many of the Somali community leaders and activists happened to be the same people who had held offices in the Somali government, who had some organizational skills.

Another problem regarding the formation of Somali community organizations was that Somalis were not familiar with the concept of community organizations as it is known in Canada. In Somali society, people seek help from immediate and extended families rather than from institutions or community organizations. The feeling of belonging or intimate association with a group is limited to one's clan, particularly in small towns, rural and nomadic areas.<sup>162</sup> If there is an emergency or pressing need that cannot be met by the extended and immediate family network, sub-clan or even clan members may be called upon to help. This culture of reliance on kinship for assistance in times of overwhelming need proved to be an obstacle to efforts to establish cross-clan community organizations. The combination of mistrust of public institutions

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<sup>160</sup> Abdullahi Dool, *Failed States: When Governance Goes Wrong*, (London: Horn Heritage Publications, 1998), 96.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>162</sup> Said Samatar and David Leitin, *Somalia: A Nation in Search of a State*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), 169.

and identifying the role of caring for and providing assistance with one's family and clan reduced the support for those who wanted to set up Somali community organizations.

When we tried to involve the community in the process of setting up a community organization and mobilize our resources to deal with the issues affecting the community, we met an uphill battle. We were accused of promoting our own personal interests and using the community as a vehicle to achieve this end. In other words, our motives were said to be *Awr kukacsi* ( mobilizing public resources and support for personal gains) ..this was because, I believe, people suffered a lot from corruption and misuse of public resources in Somalia. They lost confidence in all public institutions and in those who claim to represent public interests.....In addition to this problem of mistrust, Somalis were not used to the type of community organizations we were trying to create..... sometimes we invited people to meetings. We sent out flyers about the meeting, made many phone calls, and used all possible means of communication to reach out the community, but very few people attended these meetings... What can you do?.<sup>163</sup>

In addition to the political divisions, a further division existed between the younger Somali community activists and older politicians. This generational division caused the two groups to have conflicting priorities and concerns. The older politicians/community activists were accustomed to occupying positions of institutional and political power and were concerned with the erosion of their status and legitimacy as leaders and were making efforts to re-establish their authority or position of prominence in the community.<sup>164</sup> The older politicians utilized their knowledge of the Somali culture and traditional political constituencies to get support for their leadership positions. Some of the older-generation activists were opponents of Siad Barre's regime and had come to Canada in the earlier waves of Somali refugees in the 1980s. They often remained politically involved in Somalia and dreamt of going back there. The older politicians drew from their political experiences as exiles or/and government officials in mobilizing the Somali refugee community in Ottawa. Despite these apparent advantages, older generation activists encountered opposition in their attempts to re-establish political control over the

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<sup>163</sup> Ahmed Abdi Hashi, Former Director General, Ministry of Higher Education, Somalia, interview by the author, Ottawa, July 18, 1999.

<sup>164</sup> Jama Ibrahim, former President, Somali-Canadian Youth Society, interview by the author, Ottawa, July 23, 1999.

community. They had to fend off accusations that they were using the community organizations as a political faction intended to further their personal ambitions. They were also accused of being responsible for the creation and continuation of the civil war in Somalia.<sup>165</sup>

I think it is unfortunate that some of these old mentalities are still controlling the affairs of our community.... They still have accounts to settle with each other and if they get their way they want this refugee community in Canada to remain hostage for the political quagmire in Somalia... you see... This is what has destroyed Somalia in its entirety.....but now we are in Canada and we are here to stay... our community needs to face this reality and start spending our resources and energy in our future in Canada.<sup>166</sup>

In contrast to the older generation activists, younger activists had no interest in Somali politics and wanted to focus their community work on the concerns and needs of Somali refugees in Ottawa. Furthermore, younger community activists, most of whom were under the age of 35, were less concerned about the preservation of Somali culture and older ways of life. They felt comfortable with Canadian social and political values and many of them attended universities and colleges in Canada.<sup>167</sup> These different approaches and priorities led to conflicts between the two groups and weakened the solidarity of the Somali community in Ottawa.

Generally speaking, these organizations attempt to foster better understanding between Canadian society and the newly-arrived Somali refugees/immigrants and to assist their compatriots to integrate socially, economically, and politically into the larger society. Despite the lack of unity among different Somali groups and their inexperience in the politics of Canadian non-governmental or benevolent organizations, Somali community organizations made undeniable contributions to the integration and settlement needs of their compatriots.

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<sup>165</sup> Ahmed Abdi Hashi, Former Director General, Ministry of Higher Education, Somalia, interview by author, Ottawa, July 18, 1999.

<sup>166</sup> Hamdi Sheikh Mohamed, Executive Director, Somali Centre for Youth and Community Development, interview by author, Ottawa, June 21, 1999.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

These organizations did not differ from one another in terms of their objectives, organizational structure and scope of activity. They employ a combination of formal and informal strategies to provide services to their clients. Such a combination of formal and informal methods of service delivery places them in a unique position in the process of integration.<sup>168</sup> In the area of settlement and integration, Somali organizations assist mainstream immigration and settlement agencies to deal with the needs of refugees in a culturally sensitive manner. Clients approaching agencies for assistance are attended to in their native language. For example, clients receive information about many settlement services and issues written in their own language. The communal atmosphere that pervades these organizations and the security of using their own language helps clients to feel at ease with these organizations. Formal practices of set hours of operation, scheduled appointments, registration for services may be new to some of their clients. It is, therefore, necessary to combine this western way of doing things with traditional African ways of doing business to achieve the desired goals. The willingness of community organizations to engage in an advocacy on behalf of their community members creates a feeling of community and belonging.

In terms of structure, Somali community organizations are not different from other non-governmental agencies in Canada. Organizational structure usually consists of a board of directors, and an executive director who runs several departments in specialized areas. Somali community organizations in Ottawa have within their ranks many educated and experienced leaders. Most of the community leaders are graduates and diplomats who had a wealth of intellectual and professional expertise. For example, the president of the Somali-Canadian Teachers Association was the Dean of the College of the Education of Somali National

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<sup>168</sup> Edward Opoku-Dapaah, Somali Refugees in Toronto: A Profile, (Toronto: York University, York Lanes Press 1993), 56.

University. Officials of these organizations are elected to their positions and vacancies are advertised. Disparities exist, however, in the gender composition of those holding executive positions in Somali organizations. Females are under-represented in decision-making positions of most organizations. This is attributable to a number of factors inherent in the socio-cultural background of Somalis. As already mentioned, Somali women had less educational opportunity than men with the result that few women could meet the qualification requirements of these positions. Hence, this under-representation of Somali women in the higher positions of the community organizations is more a reflection of their marginal economic and political role in Somalia rather than a new phenomenon in Canada.

All over Africa existing social practices have consistently encouraged men, not women, to aspire to public offices. Some societies deem it inappropriate for a women to hold a position of control over men. In others, assertive women are chastized as being too aggressive. African women in Canada have yet to overcome the social and psychological barriers that have led to their social and economic marginalization in Africa as well as in Canada...<sup>169</sup>

Another reality that affects Somali women's participation in community activities is that most married women are preoccupied with raising children and with other domestic responsibilities.<sup>170</sup> Their ability to participate in voluntary activities and other community events, which are vital for acquiring work experience, getting job-related information and establishing connections with the larger community, is circumscribed by their home-bound duties. In most of these community organizations, the bulk of the staff is made-up of volunteers who represent the labour force of the organizations. There are few paid employees who provide essential services such as counseling, coordinating different activities of the agencies and office secretaries.

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<sup>169</sup> A.B.K. Kasozi, "The Integration of Black African Immigrants in Canadian Society: A Case Study of CMA", (Canadian African Newcomer Aid Centre of Toronto, CANACT, 1986), 41.

<sup>170</sup> Sylvia Thompson, "Somali Women in Ottawa" thesis presented as a partial requirement for the M.A. degree at the Department of History, Carleton University, (April, 1994), 15.

Somali community organizations have been effective in helping their compatriots in two areas, namely immigration services and community liaison programs. With respect to immigration issues, agencies provide such services as translation/interpretation, information about sponsorship procedures, referrals to legal counsel, and helping clients fill applications for permanent residence. These services are provided to the clients in their own language and in a social environment where they feel welcomed.

Canadian Immigration, recognizing the importance of these organizations in communicating with the Somali community, usually goes through them to pass information to the Somali community. In my survey, an overwhelming majority of Somalis in Ottawa, 85%, said that they go to Somali organizations if they need assistance in matters pertaining to immigration or settlement. Use of community resources, such as volunteers, helps these centers meet the large volume of clients coming to their offices. Volunteers are the backbone of these organizations for providing daily services, with each organization maintaining a pool of Somali volunteers who answer clients' questions and refer them to appropriate agencies.

**I cannot image our organization without volunteers...we are basically an organization that is run by volunteers...with our limited resources, it would be impossible for our Centre to provide any meaningful services to the community without the sacrifices of our volunteers... we depend on them for helping the community.<sup>171</sup>**

The other area where Somali organizations have been effective in helping their community is in the area of liaison programs, which are designed to assist Somali refugees/immigrants in their struggle towards integration into the larger Canadian society. These bridging programs include job-training projects, workshops on the Canadian labour market, orientation on access to professional bodies, and providing information about educational opportunities or re-certification procedures. It is in this area that the Somali organizations make a real difference in the lives of



their compatriots. In this regard, they work in collaboration with other non-Somali settlement agencies and government departments in Ottawa. The role of these organizations in helping refugees/immigrants become productive members of Canadian society cannot be overemphasized. In the words of Somali Center for Youth, Women and Community Development Director, Hamdi Sh. Mohamed, these organizations are the conduit through which the community will eventually achieve the goals of integration and self-sufficiency.

The Somali community is still in the settlement stage and requires the services of a liaison agency like our organization to help it in the process of adjustment and integration. We provide the linkage between the Somali Community and the larger society. We are the conduit through which the community will eventually achieve the goals of integration and self-sufficiency"<sup>172</sup>.

However, the Somali community organizations in Ottawa invariably suffer from two major weaknesses. The first is lack of political unity among the numerous groups. The effectiveness of these organizations has been severely compromised by their political differences, which created a sense of competition among them. Community participation of the activities of these organizations was also affected by this disunity and lack of cooperation. It is also confusing for their clients to deal with so many different organizations that claim to provide the same services.

It is very embarrassing to see seven Somali organizations which are providing exactly the same services in one city... it is a shame....it shows that we have a long way to go... it sends a very negative message about us. It shows that there is a lack of political maturity in our community ... we are still psychologically and politically controlled by the narrow-mindedness of clannish loyalty<sup>173</sup>

Somali community organizations were (are) marred by tribal divisions and disharmony. In addition to weakening their performance and efficiency, the political differences among Somali

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<sup>171</sup> Abdirisak Korod, Executive Director, Somali Centre for Family Services, interview by author, Ottawa, July 23, 1999.

<sup>172</sup> Hamdi Sh. Mohamed, Director, Somali Centre For Youth, Women and Community Development, interview by author, Ottawa, June 21, 1999.

<sup>173</sup> Sheik Ismael Mohamed, Somali Religious Leader in Ottawa, interview by author, July 20, 1999.

organizations affected their public image. Other non-Somali settlement agencies and government departments found it confusing to deal with several Somali groups each claiming to represent the Somali community and providing the same services. Although some Somali professional groups are organizing themselves, such as the Association of Somali-Canadian Teachers of Ottawa-Carleton, most organizations are involved in providing settlement-related service and dealing with the same clients, creating a great deal of duplication and overlapping. In 1995, eight of the nine Somali community organizations in Ottawa amalgamated to form the “Somali Center for Youth, Women and Community Development”.

Second, Somali refugees/immigrants in Ottawa did not have the economic capacity to support their organizations. Since the bulk of Somalis came to Canada as refugees rather than immigrants of choice, they lacked the economic base to support their institutional development. This made them dependent financially on the assistance they receive from the different levels of government, federal, provincial and municipal and from other private funders. Such a precarious financial position increased competition among Somali groups for funding. Due to the fragmented nature of the Somali community in Ottawa, other possible financial sources such as membership dues, private donations and fundraising are also not fully utilized. While some organizations receive financial assistance from government departments, such as Immigration and Citizenship, these grants cover only a fraction of the operational costs of Somali organizations, which cater to a large number of clients. There is an obvious discrepancy between the amount of settlement services they provide and the financial support they receive from governments and from other charitable organizations.

In conclusion, Somali community organizations originated in response to the influx of Somali refugees to Ottawa in the early 1990s. They continue to offer significant advantages as

vehicles for resettlement and for preserving their cultural heritage. They are an important base from which refugees can be assisted in finding jobs, information about the larger society, and visibility that would be unavailable otherwise. They fill in the cultural vacuum between the newly arrived Somalis and mainstream Canadian society. The organizations also provided some jobs for Somalis who, while working for their community, found a source of income. These organizations became a voice for Somali refugees who are extremely marginalized and suffer from inequities, prejudice and discrimination.

Although they play an important role in helping their compatriots integrate into the larger society through their provision of a variety of services and programs, Somali community organizations are plagued with internal divisions. The presence of several organizations in Ottawa gave rise to duplication and rivalry. Funding from different levels of government is limited and that restricts the capacity of these organizations to provide services to their clients. Nevertheless, they provided varied settlement services to a large number of clients on a tight budget.

## **Chapter 13.**

### **Religious Services for Somali Refugees in Ottawa.**

Almost all Somalis, (99%), are Muslims who follow the teachings of the Koran and Traditions (Sunnah) of the Prophet Mohammed. Religion provides a valuable coping mechanism in light of dislocation and the trauma of the refugee experience. It provides a feeling of identity which is very important for those who have left so much of who they are behind. Religion seems to make sense out of a world which does not seem to make a lot of sense; at times of major crisis, religious faith can be a great source of support.<sup>174</sup> Somali refugees found in Ottawa a large Muslim community with complete religious institutions such as Mosques and religious ministers or Immams who provided them necessary services, such as solemnizing marriages.

For many Canadian ethnic groups.....religion was an extremely important aspect of life. Some scarcely distinguished between religion and ethnicity, and attributed the survival of their people to religion and its organizations. Many had been sustained by religious faith in hardships preceding migration and saw the hand of God in their move to Canada.<sup>175</sup>

Religion played a role in the emigration of Somali refugees. But this role was not a significant one and affected only some of those who emigrated from Somalia prior to the civil war. Upon arrival in Ottawa, Somalis had no problem in meeting their spiritual needs for they could easily join the multi-ethnic Muslim congregation that already existed in Ottawa.

The first Mosque in Canada was erected in 1938; by the 1980s mosques were found from Halifax to Vancouver. Muslim communities vary in national and geographical origin, mother tongue, racial and physical characteristics, consciousness of their heritage, their values, their

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<sup>174</sup> S.M. Abu-Laban, "Family And Religion Among Muslim Immigrants And Their Descendants" in Muslim Family in North America, edited by Waugh, E.H. et al. (Edmonton: University of Albert Press, 1991), 7.

<sup>175</sup> Jean Burnet and Howard Palmer, Coming Canadians: An Introduction to a History of Canada's peoples, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1988), 125.

primary identity, their recent experiences as a people and their emotional attachment to their roots.<sup>176</sup>

As well as meeting their spiritual needs, religion also contributes to the adjustment process of refugees/immigrants by providing them with a sense of identity and equality. Muslims share a common belief that the Islamic way of life is not irreconcilable with many elements of the Canadian value system. As newcomers to Canada, Somalis had to learn from their fellow Muslims who had been living in Ottawa for many years about ways to perform their religious obligations in a manner compatible with the new social, religious and economic setting. While Islam is inflexible in matters relating to proscription, such as drinking alcohol or eating pork, it is flexible and pragmatic in the way it allows a Muslim to observe his/her religious duties in the face of unusual circumstances.

Our personal conduct and social-business relations must reflect the life style of Prophet Mohammed ( Peace Be Upon Him). We should be truthful, just, generous, friendly, respectful, concerned with the social issues of our time and act in a responsible way. Our words or actions must not defame or hurt other people... in our new home we have to be sensitive to other people's beliefs and values and explore ways to cooperate with other communities".<sup>177</sup>

As far as religious services are concerned, Somali refugees in Ottawa received assistance from the Muslim community which welcomed them and provided them with the emotional support they needed. As their numbers multiplied, Somalis joined different committees of the Ottawa Muslim Association. Within the Somali community there are two groups representing different religious denominations. One group is orthodox Sunni Muslims with a large following and tends to favour integration of the Somalis into the mainstream culture. The second group, sometimes referred to as fundamentalists, advocates a return to the fundamentals of Islam. This

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

group belongs to a larger movement of Muslim fundamentalists that is gaining popularity throughout the Islamic world. They demand women wear the Hijab or head-cover and are against the idea of women abandoning their domestic role in favour of getting a job and engaging in what they perceive as a men's role in the family. In general, they oppose what they call "westernized Islam" practiced by Sunni Muslims. According to this group's argument, Islamic values and principles are being diluted by the infiltration and influences of the west with the help of secular governments in many Muslim countries.<sup>178</sup> That is why they are calling for the overthrow of many governments in the Islamic world. They seek to perpetuate the Islamic traditions and require separation from what they consider as "the non-believers world". They also practice strict endogamy as part of their resistance to integration into the larger society. However, these Somali Muslim fundamentalists must not be confused with other armed fundamentalist groups in some parts of the Muslim world. They are not affiliated, to the best of our knowledge, with any political groups.

In the absence of a united community organization, and under the pressure of a culturally different host society, many Somalis find comfort and moral support in their faith groups through education and dialogue. Religious groups play a pivotal role in providing spiritual and emotional stability to Somali refugees at a time of distress and confusion in their lives. Moreover, spiritual leaders encourage Somali refugees to free themselves from the slavery of dependence on social welfare by trying to get employment or starting their own businesses. They stress achieving self-sufficiency as a precondition for protecting their religious freedom.

**If you are on social assistance, depending on others for your very existence, how can you maintain your faith or dignity? How can you tell others that your religion teaches independence and productivity. One has to be productive and hardworking for one to set an example to be followed by others. The importance**

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<sup>178</sup> Said Samatar and David Leitin, Somalia: A Nation in Search of a State, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press), 58.

of work and independence for maintaining our faith cannot be over emphasized.<sup>179</sup>

Despite its importance in keeping one's identity and providing a sense of purpose in life, religion could also be a source of conflict and misunderstanding. In a world where the only constant is change, religion requires conformity to traditional values and in some cases brings out differences by emphasizing specific faiths and imposes a degree of isolation on its followers.

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<sup>179</sup> Sheik Ismael Mohamed, Somali religious leader, interview by author, Ottawa, June 15, 1998.

## **Chapter 14.**

### **Somali Refugee Women in Ottawa.**

The majority of Somali refugees in Ottawa are women and children who were far less prepared to negotiate the problems of adjustment and integration in Canada than Somali men. For a number of reasons, already discussed in the preceding pages, women and children made up the majority of Somali refugees in Ottawa. In countries where there is a civil war, men are called upon to fight for their groups and/or causes while women are left to look after the young. Somalia is not an exception. Most Somali refugees, for instance, in camps in Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti are women and children. Some Somali refugee women have lost their husbands in war or separated from during the flight from war areas.

Many have lost their husbands in the war, resulting in a great number of Somali families headed by single mothers. Single Somali women endure extreme obstacles in Canada including gender discrimination, language difficulties, and sole responsibility for children.<sup>180</sup>

Economic participation of women in Somalia was mainly limited to household chores and child rearing. This home-maker role did not prepare Somali women to assume responsibilities that are considered men's domain such as providing for the family and dealing with the political issues of the community. These gender inequalities in Somalia are embedded in the religious and socio-economic and political structures of Somali society and put women in a dependent and subordinate position in society. As in many other pre-industrial societies in Africa and Asia, Somali culture restricts women's sphere of work within the confinement of the household and socializes them to dependent roles. Since tradition dictates that women should be homebound, fewer girls had access to educational and professional training opportunities than boys. As a

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<sup>180</sup> Ladan Affi, "The Somali Crisis In Canada: The Single Mother Phenomenon" in Mending Rips In The Sky: Opinions For Somali Communities In The 21<sup>st</sup> Century, ed. Hussein Adam and Richard Ford (Boston, Red Sea Press, 1994), 442.



result of this educational inequality, the literacy rate among Somali refugee women in Ottawa is very low compared to that of Somali men. As a group, Somali refugee women in Ottawa began their settlement process as the most disadvantaged newcomers and lacked the necessary tools to enable them to adjust to a life in Canada.

Difficulties of social integration are more likely to be encountered by women than men because Somali women tend to have greater difficulty in acquiring the language of the host community... this is due to a fairly high illiteracy rate among women in the Somali language, resulting from differing priorities on the need for education in Somali culture prior to leaving Somalia. Illiteracy in one's mother-tongue makes learning a new language much more difficult.<sup>181</sup>

Table #3

1. In Somalia, what was the highest education you completed?  
 a. secondary or lower    b. post-secondary    c. some trade.

Level of education	% of male	Number of male participants	% of female	Number of female participants
Secondary or lower	60%	18	80%	45
Post-secondary	20%	30	10%	9
Some trade	20%	12	10%	6
Total	100%	60	100%	60

Source: Survey questionnaire responses, July 1998.

Somali refugees in general and women in particular face a multitude of barriers in their attempt to adapt to life in Canada. Almost all Somali refugee families have some family

<sup>181</sup>Edward Opoku-Dapaah, Somali Refugees in Toronto: A Profile, (Toronto: York University, York Lanes Press, 1993), 34.

members separated from them in Somalia or in other countries. Separation from other family members affects Somali refugee women not only in the sense of missing the customary support system, but also the psychological impact it may inflict on them. Somali women tend to be more fully enmeshed in family networks than men and more devastated by their absence. In addition to being responsible for supporting their children, as they adapt to the new country, as well as for transmitting the family's values and traditions to them, many Somali refugee women also had to assume the role of provider for the family, a new role with which they were not familiar and for which they were not trained. In their new role, some women learned new skills and gained confidence in their abilities to support their families independently. When their husbands rejoined them or when they remarried in the case of widows, these women refused to assume the traditional submissive role of women and wanted to enjoy their independence. This caused breakup of many Somali refugee families in Ottawa

Conflict resolution is another area where Somali refugee women in Ottawa felt the absence of an extended family network. In Somali culture, elders and members of the couple's immediate relatives always intervene in case of a conflict that threatens to cause family breakup. For instance, if a husband becomes abusive to his wife, relatives from both sides would meet to discuss ways to resolve the matter. If after this mediation the husband continues to mistreat his wife, her family would ask her to leave him and come back to her parents, leaving the abusive husband to care for the children. This usually has the effect of forcing the husband to reconsider his behavior toward his wife if he wants her to come back to him. The wife would not return to the abusive husband until he promised to change his behavior. This was an escape route for women who stayed in abusive relationships. In the absence of the traditional mechanism to resolve marital discord, the divorce rate in the Somali community is very high. Also in the

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absence of her parents and other members of the extended family, women become vulnerable to abuse. Somali families who are experiencing difficulties in their relationships do not usually seek professional counseling because they are reluctant to reveal their family affairs to anyone other than their close relatives. Those who complain about their husbands' treatment suffer from ostracism and name calling "waa halowday" (spoiled by the new western culture).

As mentioned earlier, a feature of Somali refugees in Ottawa is the large size of their families. One of the controversial concepts in Somali community in Ottawa is family planning. The use of contraceptives is not an acceptable practice in Islam and is vehemently opposed by religious groups. Prevention of a pregnancy or an abortion by any means is a prohibited practice in Islam unless such a pregnancy would endanger the health of the mother. The sense of helplessness and desperation felt by some Somali refugee women is highlighted in the following statement made by a Somali mother.

I'm a single mother with six children. I have to care for them, go to a language class and do everything by myself... in Somalia there were aunts, uncles, sisters neighbors to help you. In Canada no one is around to give a hand...and it is very cold here. If one of the children gets sick, what can you do? There is no one to help you... and the children... they have totally changed, the way they talk, the way they dress and the way they treat their parents and elders... and what if you try to discipline them or even talk to them? There is Children's Aid Society, there is the police....I don't know what will become of them... I just look at them ..and keep quiet<sup>182</sup>

## **Chapter 15.**

### **Housing**

A major factor of integration into a new society is how and where new immigrants are housed. A feature of the residential characteristics of Somali refugees in Ottawa is the disproportionate number of Somali families occupying public housing. Given the high rate of unemployment among Somali immigrants in the Ottawa-Carleton region, and given the problems they encounter in attempting to rent from the market, it is understandable that they seek help from housing authorities. A number of factors, such as the safety of a given neighborhood and the people who live there, can influence the decision of one's residential preferences.

Due to the income inequalities and the nature of jobs that immigrants do, the more recent, and often relatively disadvantaged, new immigrant groups would be expected to be more heavily concentrated in areas nearer to the central business district, while the older and more established populations would be expected to be more heavily concentrated in suburban areas.<sup>183</sup>

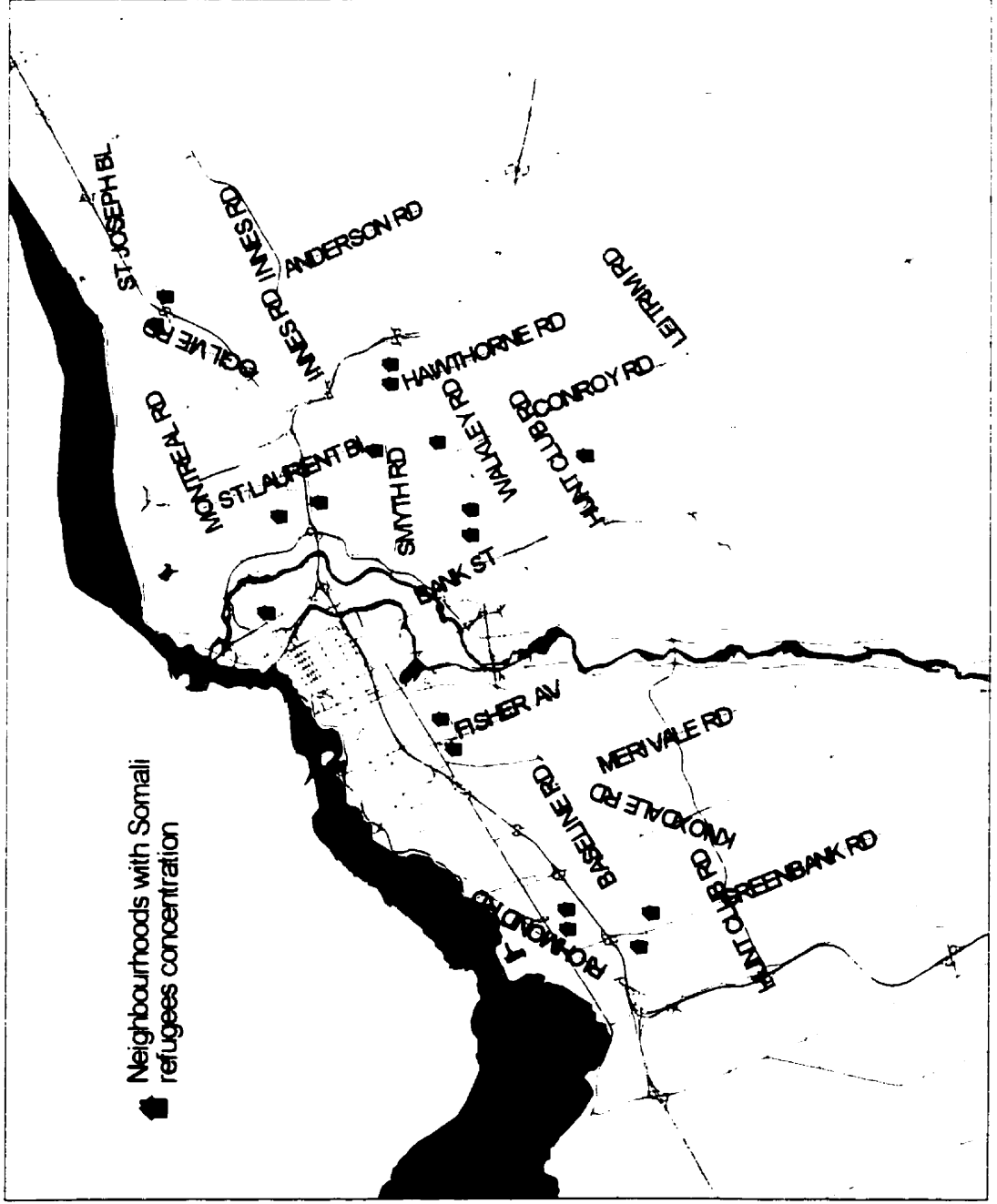
There are three factors which account for the overrepresentation of Somali refugees in public housing. The economic status of individuals plays a determining role in what neighborhood they may choose to live. As discussed earlier, a small percentage of Somalis in Ottawa are employed due to a number of factors. This economic reality circumscribes their ability in terms of residential options and drives them to poor neighborhoods and public housing. Private landlords are reluctant to rent their units to new immigrants, particularly to those who are financially dependent on social assistance. "Studies have also documented the behavior of employers and landlords in Toronto toward minority groups such as Chinese, Blacks and South Asians"<sup>184</sup>. It was found that a variety of screening processes effectively discriminate against these groups

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<sup>182</sup> Halima Ali, Somali Refugee in Ottawa, Interview by author, Ottawa, June 20, 1998.

<sup>183</sup> Warren E. Kalbach, "Ethnic Residential Segregation and Its Significance for the Individual in an Urban Setting" in *Ethnic Identity and Equality: varieties of experience in a Canadian City*, ed. by Raymond Breton et al., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 96.

# Settlement Pattern of Somali Refugees in Ottawa (1986-1996)



without being overt enough to be detected by the applicant, or to be used as evidence in a tribunal or court.

Housing has also been identified as a major issue. Families on welfare are asked to provide the name of a co-signer who has an income of \$50,000 or over. This criteria cannot be met by many Somali single mothers and they have no option but to enter shelters to qualify for subsidized housing from the Ottawa-Carleton Housing Authority. This, in turn, has led to an influx of Somalis into certain areas of the city”<sup>185</sup>

Table #

1. What type of housing do you live in A) subsidized public housing? B) Market rate housing?

Type of housing	% of Somali refugees	Number of respondents
Subsidized housing	55%	66
Market rate housing	45%	54
Total	100%	120

As the table indicates, a majority of Somalis live in public housing units. The concentration of refugees/newcomers in certain parts of the city created tensions between the new arrivals and old residents of the area. When different cultures and value systems interacted on a daily basis and the new group demanded a share of the services in the neighborhood such as community centers, play grounds for children, and public transportation, conflicts and misunderstandings became necessary parts of the adjustment for all concerned. This has resulted in some mainstream Canadians moving out of these neighborhoods to the suburban areas of the city or to

<sup>184</sup>A.H. Richmond, The Context of Refugee Resettlement: Refugees and Racism in Canada, (Toronto: Centre For Refugee Studies, York University, York Lanes Press, 1989), 56.

<sup>185</sup>Ladan Affi, “The Somali Crisis In Canada: The Single Mother Phenomenon”, in *Mending Rips in the Sky: Opinions for Somali Communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Hussein Adam and Richard Ford, (Boston: Red Sea Press, 1994), 443.

other parts of the city where there is less visibility of newcomer refugees/immigrants.<sup>186</sup> There are four large Somali concentrations in Ottawa-Carleton region. Two are in the west-end near the Bayshore Shopping Centre and the Merivale and Carling Ave. intersection. One is in the southeast between Heron and Hunt Club roads. And the fourth one is in the east of the city near the Gloucester Shopping Centre at Blair and Oglivie road. While these are the main clusters, Somali refugees are found throughout the city.

Another factor that contributed to the clustering of Somali refugees in particular locations of the city is their need to stay close to each other. Facing a variety of settlement difficulties such as lack of language and lack of an established community to bridge their integration, Somali refugees needed to stay together. By living in the same neighborhoods, they could socialize together, help each other, for instance, in child-care and feel the security of living in their own community.

It would be impossible for me to live in a neighborhood where there were no Somalis to help me.... I cannot even imagine. I don't speak enough English to go around and communicate with my doctor or with the man in the rental office.... everyday we go out together and shop and talk about our problems.... I have a friend... she helps me and I help her.... If she is away I look after her children and she does the same for me... if I run out of money I borrow from her... I cannot do without my Somali friends....<sup>187</sup>

Somalis in general tend to prefer living in neighborhoods where they can be in contact with other Somalis for practical reasons. Culturally, Somalis are used to living in a communal life style where there is a lot of interaction and sharing of responsibilities and information. This traditional tendency of Somalis to stay close to each other is compounded by their emotional needs resulting from the refugee experience and separation from relatives and friends. Length of

<sup>186</sup> *Ottawa Citizen*, October 28, 1993, B1.

<sup>187</sup> Zabib Mohamed, Somali Refugee in Ottawa, interview by the author, Ottawa, May 24, 1998.

residence in Canada plays an important role in residential segregation of immigrants<sup>188</sup> and the Somalis, as recent arrivals, have not yet established the economic flexibility and social links in Ottawa to enable them to feel at ease living in mainstream neighborhoods or suburban areas.

When asked about their attitude towards living in public housing and whether they would like to move out of public housing, respondents gave different answers. While they all acknowledged the benefits of public housing, such as low rent and being closer to other Somali friends and relatives, they expressed concerns regarding raising their children in these neighborhoods. A significant minority of the respondents, 45%, believed that some old residents in these public housing units use drugs or are alcoholic. Such a perception might contribute to the tensions and conflicts between Somalis and non-Somalis in these public housing units. A study on the attitudes of non-Somalis in these neighborhoods towards newcomers would be useful in terms of understanding the relationship between new and old residents. A Somali father in one of these public housing units had this to say about his neighborhood:

These houses, (public housing units) were meant for bums who are not responsible even for themselves....I would move out from here tomorrow if I could....I worry about my children growing up in this environment... you see... in the summer they all come out drinking alcohol and perhaps doing drugs in front of their units and playing music so loud that nobody could sleep....even the policemen don't know what to do with these bums.....and the language they use... you don't want to hear it....very vulgar...positively indecent...I don't think they hate us or they are doing anything to hurt us but their behavior is not good for children.....this is not a place you would want to raise your kids because they may think that all those things are normal...<sup>189</sup>

Family size is another aspect of Somali immigrants in Ottawa that affected their residential characteristics. To rent a private house for a very large family is difficult not only in a financial sense, but also in finding a landlord who is willing to rent his/her house to a tenant with many

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<sup>188</sup> R. Breton *et al.*, *Ethnic Identity and Equality: Varieties of Experiences in a Canadian City* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 102.

<sup>189</sup> Mohamed Bulle, Somali Refugee in Ottawa, interview by author, Ottawa, June 19, 1998.



children, particularly to an immigrant. Some Somali families who rented from private landlords lived in very overcrowded houses or apartments in high-rise buildings because they could not afford to rent houses with enough rooms for all their children. Therefore, family size is one of the factors that drove Somalis into public housing. Many Somalis, particularly youngmen, also share accommodations as a strategy to deal with financial limitations and callous landlords.

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## **Conclusion.**

As an immigrant group, Somalis are relatively new arrivals in Canada. The overwhelming majority of Somalis came to Canada after 1988 at which time a bloody and prolonged civil war began in their country. The root cause of their migration to Canada, and to many other countries around the world, was the political and economic turmoil which plagued Somalia since it went to war with Ethiopia in 1977. This political instability culminated in the outbreak of a full-fledged civil war in the spring of 1988. Prior to this political strife, the repressive military regime of Siad Barre, who ruled Somalia for more than 20 years, sent many Somalis into exile and others left the country of their own for fear of persecution. Some of these political refugees came to Canada as early as 1984.

While many Somali refugees who came to Canada had emigrated from Somalia under political pressure of the military dictatorship, there were many others who had left the country in search of a better economic life in Europe and the Middle East. Following the overthrow of Siad Barre's military regime in 1991 by a countrywide armed uprising and the ensuing civil war, Somalis who were working in foreign countries had to apply for refugee status in these same countries or had to leave if the country in which they had worked or stayed was not a signatory to the International Convention for Refugees. (This was the case for those Somalis who were in Saudi Arabia).<sup>190</sup> A significant number of Somali refugees in Canada came from Middle Eastern countries, particularly from Arab Gulf States. Through a variety of legal and illegal travel means, thousands of Somali refugees migrated to Canada over the last 13 years. Although the majority of Somali refugees in Ottawa came from Somalia, other Somali-speakers from neighbouring

countries of Djibouti, Kenya, and Ethiopia also migrated to Canada as refugees from Somali proper, taking advantage of the civil conflict in Somalia and claiming convention refugees status in Canada.

For the most part, Somali refugees settled in urban centers since they could not venture into the countryside. Canada's capital city, Ottawa, received more than its share of Somali refugees. More than 7,000 Somali refugees/immigrants (excluding those who came to Ottawa after 1996 and those who did not participate in the census of 1996) chose Ottawa as their new home for a variety of reasons ranging from having relatives in Ottawa to cheaper housing opportunities. The majority of Somalis in Ottawa came to Canada as refugees, mostly across the United States border, and made a refugee claim at the port of entry.

The refugee status determination process in Canada is lengthy and complex and subjected Somali refugee claimants to emotional hearings and delays in their claims. This, in turn, affected Somali refugee claimants' adjustment efforts, for without legal status they were ineligible to work, go to school or access services offered to immigrants in Canada. The initial phase of Somali refugees' settlement in Canada was marked by long delays of their immigration hearings and uncertainty about their legal status and future. "Administrative restrictions such as ineligibility for official orientation, restricted access to work permits, education, and skills training impaired their short-term adaptation. Available support was limited to subsistence needs."<sup>191</sup> Until after their claims were accepted, which could sometimes take as long as a year, Somali refugees were left to their own devices in terms of adaptation and settlement needs. They had to look for other alternative sources of assistance such as a kin or religious groups.

Despite these delays, which are inherent in the refugee status determination process itself, in

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<sup>190</sup> Saudi Arabia is not a signatory to the Geneva Convention for refugees

<sup>191</sup> Opoku-Dapaah, *Somali Refugees in Toronto*, 93.

determining their claims, Somali refugees initially enjoyed a high acceptance rate (91-92%) in their refugee claims. Those who were successful in becoming permanent residents sponsored their family members left behind. However, after a huge influx of Somali refugees in Canada, Canadian Immigration introduced new restrictions to control the flow of Somali refugees. One of the new conditions was the requirement of a genuine identity document to be presented by Somali refugees when applying for convention refugee status in Canada. This was a difficult requirement for Somali refugees to satisfy due to the fact that a majority of these refugees had left Somalia under emergency circumstances following the outbreak of fighting and had no opportunity to take their ID documents with them. These new immigration laws put a stop to the landing and accepting of many Somali refugees. The combined effects of traumatic experiences and dislocation as a result of the civil war in Somalia and the disappointment they encountered in Canada with respect to their refugee status claims have had a negative impact on Somali refugees. The lack of legal status and the uncertainty surrounding their future reinforced their sense of loss and reduced their motivation to start life from scratch.

The circumstances which led to the flight of Somali refugees to different countries in the world, including Canada, and the subsequent experiences of trauma and deprivation had a profound impact on their settlement and integration capacity. Somali refugees faced the enormous task of adjusting to the economic, social and political systems of their adopted society with which they shared little in terms of culture, language, religion, and socio-economic structure.

Successful adjustment and integration of immigrants to a host society is a function of a number of factors. These include the socio-economic and political background of the incoming group; the economic and political condition of the receiving society and the existence and or

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nonexistence of cultural and economic linkages between the host society and the immigrant group.

A number of factors contributed to the initial adjustment and resettlement challenges faced by Somali refugees in Ottawa-Carleton region and conditioned the pace of their integration. These factors can be divided into two general categories: background factors and factors stemming from the Canadian socio-economic and political reality.

**Background factors:** (1) Refugees: Among the factors that impacted on the positive integration of Somali refugees in Canada is the fact that they came as refugees rather than immigrants who were selected for their professional skills, financial ability and potential integration possibilities into Canadian society. According to the Canada Immigration and Refugee Board records (IRB), the majority of Somali refugees/immigrants, 95%, came to Canada after 1988 following the outbreak of civil war in Somalia. The remaining 5% had come prior to 1988 but after 1984. This means that they were ill-equipped, in terms of occupational and language skills and cultural values, to deal with the challenges of Canadian socio-economic and political environment. Nor did they have the benefit of pre-migration orientation about life in Canada. The majority of Somali refugees were women and children who fled from the war in their country and had lower rates of literacy compared to Somali men. This demographic fact limited the number of employable individuals among Somali refugees during the first years of their settlement in Ottawa. In other words, the relative deficiency of Somali refugee's human capital undermined their economic adaptation for the initial years of the resettlement process. Lack of knowledge of Canada's official languages was also one of major barriers faced by Somali refugees upon their arrival in Canada. Since neither English nor French is spoken in Somalia, very few Somalis could speak either language when they came to Canada. Findings of this research indicated that

Somali refugees initially encountered difficulties in their settlement process in Canada.

Furthermore, since their arrival in Canada was unorganized, they had little access to settlement assistance such as orientations about life in Canada, English/French language programs, job training programs and their legal rights.

(2) Political divisions: Somali refugees brought their political divisions with them and as a result were unable to put their resources together in their struggle to resettle in Canada. The clan-based conflict in Somalia continues to influence Somali refugees in Canada and prevented them from pulling together. This disunity reflected negatively on them as a group and reduced their capacity to address settlement needs together. It also affected the assistance provided to them by other governmental and non-governmental agencies for adjustment and integration for it is confusing to deal with a multiple number of organizations claiming to represent the same group. Attempts by some Somalis to overcome such intra-Somali conflict have been, so far only partially successful.

(3) Cultural differences: Not only were the Somalis refugees, but also they came from a cultural background that had little in common with the Canadian culture. For Somalis the migration problems were compounded by the degree of cultural differences between their new country and the old one. Lack of knowledge of Canada's official languages was the single most difficult barrier for Somali refugees/immigrants in Ottawa to integrate into the Canadian society. Only 5% of the respondents in my survey said they were fluent in English upon their arrival in Canada.

**Factors emanating from the Canadian socio-economic and political reality:**

(1) Economic recession: Canada was experiencing a bad recession at the time when most Somali refugees arrived (1989-1994). In a time when many Canadians were having difficulties in finding

jobs, new immigrants could be perceived as contributing to the unemployment problem both as competitors and as a burden on the social assistance system. High unemployment and underemployment among Somalis may be partially attributed to the economic recession of the early 1990s.

(2) Silent influx: unlike other refugees groups such as the Vietnamese and those from Bosnia, Somali refugees came to Canada unnoticed by the public and without media dramatization to mobilize resources and sympathy for their arrival. The involvement of both the Canadian government and humanitarian organizations in helping Somali refugees come to Canada was minimal.<sup>192</sup> Due to this lack of awareness and reception, Somalis were left to their own devices in terms of adjustment and adaptation needs upon arrival in Canada. (3) Lack of a cultural bridging group: Somalia had no historical links with Canada and there were no Canadians of Somali origin to help refugees in the settlement process or lobby the government to set up settlement related programs for Somali refugees. The existence of such an advocacy group would play an important role in fostering unity among different Somali groups and establish links with other mainstream organizations.

### **Prospects for integration of Somali refugees into Canadian society**

Despite the fact that Somali refugees encountered enormous challenges during the initial years of their settlement in Canada, there are signs that they are making progress in their attempts to fit into the Canadian mosaic. Many Somali students, for example, are enrolled in universities and colleges in Ottawa and are expected to join the Canadian workforce very soon. Also a large number of Somali refugee youth go to high schools. Somali entrepreneurs have started several

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<sup>192</sup> Although some Somali refugees made it to Canada through resettlement programs by the Canadian government or other agencies, I was unable to obtain from Immigration Canada the number of Somali refugees who were sponsored by the Canadian government or by humanitarian organizations. However, the majority of Somali refugees came to Canada on their own.

small businesses. While the traumatic refugee experiences and challenges of settling in Canada still hinder their full integration, there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel for Somalis.

Integration, as defined by Anthony H. Richmond, refers to “partaking in the life of the country, productively, economically and culturally and to one’s own advantage (making use of the social services of the country, its culture opportunities for advancement etc ..)”<sup>193</sup>. According to the findings of this research, the integration process for Somalis is slow due to their unique situation. Economic adaptation of any given group is a function of a number of variables such as level of education of the group, economic opportunities existing in the host society, the reception and settlement services accorded the group by the host society, and the cultural and linguistic relationship between the immigrant group and the host society.

In the case of Somali refugees in Ottawa, economic adaptation has long way to go. Over 60% of Somalis in Ottawa are unemployed or under-employed, according to the survey conducted as part of this research. The language barrier, technological differences between Somalia and Canada, institutional barriers, the ratio of Somali women to men and adults to children, job discrimination, length of residence in Canada, and lack of jobs in the Ottawa area are among the factors identified during my research to be responsible for the high unemployment among Somali refugees. These factors limit the participation of Somali refugees in the Canadian labour force. As far as employment is concerned, Somalis are extremely disadvantaged. Faced by these Canadian labour market constraints, some Somali refugees turned their energy to self-employment as an alternative means of improving the quality of their lives. Somali entrepreneurs started small ethnic businesses such as restaurants, convenience stores, money transfer etc.

Social integration is not faring better than the economic adaptation either. One characteristic

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<sup>193</sup> A. H. Richmond, *The Context of Refugee Resettlement: Refugees and Racism in Canada*, (Toronto: Centre For Refugee Studies, York University, York Lanes Press, 1989), 17.



of Somali refugees in the Ottawa-Carleton region is their residential concentration in certain areas of the city. The majority of Somali refugee families live in clusters of subsidized public housing. Given their financial situation, they had to turn to public shelters and emergency housing when they arrived in Ottawa. They encountered difficulties in their attempts to rent private houses. Discriminatory treatment by landlords and their financial situation forced many of them to seek subsidized public housing. The research also showed that the desire of Somali refugees to stay close to each other was another reason for their residential concentration. This concentration imposes a degree of isolation on Somali refugees and limits their interaction with the wider society, and therefore slows their future integration.

Somali refugees in Ottawa also created a number of community organizations as a coping mechanism to address their settlement needs. Although they do not have enough resources, these organizations play an important role in helping their compatriots to deal with the challenges of settling in a new country. Clan-based political divisions continue to plague Somali community organizations and reduces their capacity to provide services to their clients as well as their political clout as a pressure group.

In the light of these enormous obstacles and challenges facing Somali immigrants in Canada and given their socio-economic and political background, it appears that it will take a long for Somalis to achieve full integration into Canadian society.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

Confidential

The following questionnaire has been designed to collect some information on Somali Immigrants in Ottawa-Carleton Region with respect to their migration to Canada. Your cooperation in this study would be greatly appreciated. Please answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge. All your responses are confidential and you do not need to write your name on the questionnaire.

IN SOMALIA

1. In Somalia, did you live in? (Circle the number that applies to you)

1. A large city                      2. A small city      3. A large town  
4. A small town                      5. A rural settlement    6. A nomadic settlement or camp

2. Did you come from Somalia or a Somali inhabited region of

1. Djibouti      2. Ethiopia      3. Kenya

3. Did you work for pay in Somalia?

1. Yes      2. No.

4. If you answer yes to question no. 3, did you work

1. In the public sector (for the government)    2. In the private sector  
3. Was a student    4. Other (specify).....

5. In Somalia, if you worked for pay, what was your occupation? (Give only the title, e.g.

accountant, teacher, livestock farmer, lawyer, cleaner, home maker ect.)

.....

6. In Somalia, what was the highest education you completed?



**14. If you have children, how many of them were born in Canada?**

- 1. All of them
- 2. Non of them
- 3. Number of children born in Canada \_\_\_\_\_.

**15. Are your academic qualifications recognized in Canada?**

- 1. Yes
- 2. No

**16. If you answer No. to question 14, give reason(s)?**

- 1. Upgrading requirements
- 2. Equivalency could no be established
- 3. Transcripts written in Somali
- 4. Other (please specify).....

**17. What is the highest education you completed in Canada?**

- 1. Grades 0-----6
- 2. Grades 7.....9
- 3. Grades 10....12
- 4. Some trade School
- 5. University graduate
- 6. Attended some ESL classes
- 7. Did not attend any school in Canada.

**18. Are you currently enrolled in one of the following?**

- 1. ESL
- 2. Adult High School
- 3. High School
- 4. College
- 5. University (please specify).....
- 6. Other (please specify).....
- 7.

I am not currently enrolled in any school or program of study.

**19. How would you rate your level of English?**

- 1. Excellent
- 2. Very good
- 3. Good
- 4. Poor
- 5. Not at all

**20. What is your major source of income?**

- 1. Work income
- 2. Social Assistance
- 3. Unemployment Insurance
- 4. Self-employed
- 5. Other (specify).....

**21. If you are working for pay now, is your work related to your occupation in Somalia?**

1. yes                      2. No                      3. Not applicable

**22. If you are not working for pay, what do you think prevents you from getting a job?**

1. Shortage of jobs    2. Lack of Canadian work experience    3. Lack of education/language barrier    4. Family responsibilities    5. Racial discrimination or institutional barrier.  
6. Permanent residence or immigration problem    8. Prior education not recognised.  
9. Cultural/religious barriers    10. Lack of Canadian labour market information

**23. In what part of Ottawa do you live?**

1. Ottawa    2. Gloucester    3. Nepean    4. Kanata    5. Orleans    6. Other (specify).....

**24. Sex:**    1. Male.....    2. Female.....

**25. What is your family size?.....**

**26. Which of the following age group do you belong to?**

1. 18 to 29    2. 30 to 45    3. 46 to 65    4. 66 and above

**27. Do you live in a subsidised house/apartment?**

1. Yes    2. No

**28. How many rooms are there in your present house/apartment?**

1. Number of rooms-----

**29. Why did you choose to live in Ottawa?**

1. My relatives live here    2. I came to Ottawa first    3. Cheap housing  
4. Job opportunity    5. Because of its bilingual services    6. Other (specify).....

**30. Do you live in a neighbourhood with many Somalis?**

1. Yes    2. No

**31. In your spare time, do you mostly socialise with**

1. Your Somali friends?    2. Canadian friends?    3. Both

**32. If peace returns to Somalia, would you like to go back to Somalia?**

1. Yes    2. No    3. Can not decide now

## PRESS RELEASE

As a result of the civil war in Somalia in 1991, Canada granted safe haven to thousands of Somalis. Estimates show that about fifteen thousand Somalis live in Ottawa-Carleton alone. To cope with the settlement needs of this large influx of newcomers from Somalia, a plethora of community organizations created served traditional constituencies, while others served the broader community. Some were very active, within the community .

All in all, there are 14 Somali community organizations in the national Capital region alone. The ever-growing community organizations among others resulted in: duplication of services, competition for funding resources, dispersal of available human resources and the stereotyping of our community as a divided house. This is compounded by the increasing settlement and post-settlement needs of our community that demand immediate, timely and serious attention.

From 1992 and onwards the Somali community groups and activists were engaged in a serious and open dialogue as to how to unite this community and form a single Somali service provider. This process was accelerated in the Fall of 1995 and has today culminated in an agreement by the overwhelming majority of organizations, support groups and activists to form a single Somali service-provider.

This agreement provides for the creation of the Somali Center for Youth, Women, and Community Development, voluntary disbandment of existing organizations, election of a Board of Directors and pooling all financial and human resources.

We have agreed to officially inaugurate this new organization on the 13th of June 1996 at 111 Lisgar St. at 5:30 to 7:30 P.M.

It is our belief that this new center will provide efficient and quality services to our community. We also hope that this unity process of Ottawa-Carleton Somali organizations will serve as a model for other newcomer organizations that may face the problems of fragmentation.

We earnestly appeal to the larger community to support this laudable initiative. Thank you very much

**UNITY IS STRENGTH**

Sincerely



Leila Affi  
Chair, Executive Committee



## **Appendix C**

### **Amalgamation of Somali Community Organizations in Ottawa-Carleton**

The following Somali Organizations:

1. Coalition of Somali Canadian Community Organizations
2. Somali Canadian Youth Society
3. Somali University Student Association
4. Somali Association of North America
5. Somali Community Advancement and Integration Centre
6. Somali Professional Association
7. Somali Research Group
8. Communautaire Djibouti-Somali Francophone

agreed to:

- a) Disband all the organizations
- b) Establish a single Somali Canadian Service Provider, the Somali Centre for Youth, Women and Community Development.
- c) Incorporate this new entity immediately and in accordance with the laws of Canada
- d) Continue working towards the unity of all Somali Community Organizations, including any new ones.
- e) Cooperate and maintain a sustainable collaborative arrangement with other service providers and community groups.
- f) Open membership to any Somali Community Organization that subscribes to the principles, goals and constitution of the centre.

# SOMALI COUNCIL FOR FAIR IMMIGRATION (TASK FORCE)

2365 FINCH AVENUE WEST, SUITE 204A  
NORTH YORK, ONTARIO, M9M 2W8  
TELEPHONE: (416) 740-6783 Fax # 740-6748

To: Honourable Sergio Marchi, Minister of Citizenship  
and Immigration

From : The Somali Community of Canada

Re: Annotated Immigration Act of Canada, Article 19(1)(L)(1.1)

Dear Honourable Minister,

For the past few weeks the world news was dominated by allegations that Spain is using an illegal fishing net which sweeps the floor and indiscriminately catches all aquatic life, both big and small. While these events were unfolding in the Atlantic, a whole community in Canada felt that its members were the target of a seemingly similar method of entrapment. In the latter case, the tool was not a fishing net but a sweeping and broadly-defined immigration law which can easily be interpreted to mean that any Somali refugee or immigrant who was employed by the public sector during the Siad Barre regime (1969-1991) is subject to arrest and removal from Canada.

In April 1995 , at least five persons belonging to the Somali community in Toronto, were summarily arrested, detained, and interrogated under s.19(1)(L)(1.1) of the Immigration Act. To the best of our knowledge most of these persons served in a civilian capacity during the reign of Barre's military regime, and did not hold positions which would have allowed them to influence the exercise of government power. These arrests and detention sent shivers throughout the community. A question that is being repeated frequently, within the community is: "who is next?". We are a community under seige!

Honourable Mr. Marchi, the Somali community is one which, to put it mildly, has experienced tragic events during the past few years. A knock on the door in the middle of the night, by uniformed personnel, brings back unpleasant memories to many of us. Our gratitude to Canada for giving us refuge, when we were in need of it, can't be articulated in words. However, the blanket application of a flawed immigration law is undermining our struggle to settle down, educate our children, contribute to the well being of our community and the Canadian society at large.

Honourable Mr. Marchi, we wish to make it clear that we are not defending any individual who was engaged in terrorism, systemic or gross human rights violations, war crimes or crimes against humanity. On the contrary, we strongly urge the Canadian government to seek out these individuals and bring them to justice. We concede that human rights violations did take place in Somalia during and after Said Barre regime. What we strongly protest against is this flawed and broadly-defined law, which like the Spanish fishing nets, is being applied indiscriminately. The result is the incrimination of innocent people, which in turn is causing a great deal of anxiety for the community as a whole and which may result in the division and destruction of families within the community.

Since independence in 1960, the Somali government has been the main employer in the country. The private sector has been small, consisting mainly of family-run small business. Therefore, Article 19(1)(L)(1.1), which loosely defines "senior members or senior officials in service of the government" can be used to arrest a Somali community member who may have served, for example, as a municipal judge who presided over a zoning disputes or a Director in the Somali Ministry of Health and so on. Furthermore, since we are the only community in Canada which originated from a state with such a poor human rights record and which practically no longer exists, we are uniquely impacted by this law.

We have consulted legal counsel and take the position that s. 19(1)(L)(1.1) violates our community members' rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Moreover, we take the position that the government lacks the jurisdiction to embark upon such actions against our community members, specifically those who have already been determined to be Convention refugees.

Those individuals of our community who have been accused under this law intend to utilize all legal actions/remedies available to them in challenging the validity of the section of the Immigration Act. In this regard they have the full backing and support of the Somali community as a whole.

Our community, which is united on this issue, strongly recommends the following:

- \* That this law be amended to avoid and minimize the victimization of innocent people;

communities, be consulted in the process of amending this law;

- \* That there be a moratorium on the enforcement of this law until any amendment is finalized, or in the alternative, until the question of the validity of this law has been litigated through the Court system.

We would also be very grateful if you would give us the opportunity to meet with you and/or the appropriate members of your staff, so that we can elaborate further on our concerns. Thank you

Somali Council for fair Immigration

*MD AFGARSHE*

Dr. Mohamud D. Afgarshe

Chairperson.

Hon. Sergio Marchi, P.C., M.P.  
York West

APPENDIX E

Dr. Mohamud D. Afgarshe  
Chairperson  
Somali Council for Fair Immigration  
Task Force  
2365 Finch Avenue West  
Suite 204A  
North York, Ontario  
M9M 2W8

JUN -7 1995

Dear Dr. Afgarshe:

Thank you for your recent letter concerning  
sub-paragraph 19(1)(L)(1.1) of the Immigration Act.

Unfortunately, my schedule does not permit me to meet with you to discuss this matter. I would, however, like to take this opportunity to tell you that I am pleased to note that you support the right and obligation of the government of Canada to seek out and bring to justice persons who have engaged in terrorism, systemic or human rights violations, war crimes or crimes against humanity. The Immigration Act allows the Government to take action if persons in Canada are found to be senior members of a regime guilty of crimes against humanity. As you will recall, Citizenship and Immigration Canada recently took action against several alleged World War II war criminals.

You may be assured that I do recognize the struggle that all Convention refugees and immigrants face in resettling in a new country. You have expressed concern that this provision in the Immigration Act may adversely affect innocent members of the Somali community who, at one time, were employed by the former Somali government, and are now working hard to integrate into Canadian society. You may be assured that it is not the intent of this provision to take action against persons who were general members of the public service in their former country. The Immigration Act specifically refers to senior members or senior officials who were engaged in terrorism, systemic or gross human rights violations, war crimes or crimes against humanity. The

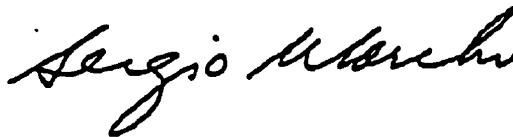
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persons to whom this provision applies are persons who, by virtue of the position they hold or have held, are or were able to exert a significant influence on the exercise of government power.

Sadly, the former Somalia is not the only state or former state that has exhibited a less than exemplary human rights record. Prohibitions against war criminals in Canadian immigration law are not designed to have a punitive effect on any particular national group in Canada. They are designed, rather, to protect the citizens of Canada and to send a signal to the world that Canada will not tolerate terrorism, systemic or gross human rights violation, war crimes or crimes against humanity.

Thank you again for taking the time to write and share your concerns with me. You may be assured that this provision in the Immigration Act is not and will not be exercised indiscriminately. The Immigration Act is applied within the context of the Rule of Law which governs Canadian society as a whole and within the specific and stringent guidelines enunciated in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Yours sincerely,



Hon. Sergio Marchi, M.P.,  
York West.

IN THE FEDERAL COURT OF CANADA  
TRIAL DIVISION

BETWEEN:

HUSSEIN JAMA ADEN, FADUMO GUIRE ALI,  
FOSIYA RIYALE, ADEN MOALLIMADEN,  
ABDULAZIZ MOHAMED ABDI, MOHAMED ALI ABDI,  
SHARMARKE MOHAMED SALEH, AMINA NURI JAMA HASSAN,  
ALI HAJI MOHAMED, MADINA MOHAMUD HASSAN,  
MARIAM ABDULLAHI DIRIE

Plaintiffs

- and -

HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN

Defendant

## AMENDED AMENDED STATEMENT OF CLAIM

(Filed on the 28th day of May, 1997)

1. The Plaintiffs are all citizens of Somalia. All have been accepted as Convention refugees in Canada.
2. Pursuant to subsection 406.04(1) of the Immigration Act, all of the Plaintiffs have submitted applications for landing in Canada within the prescribed time period.
3. Subsection 46.04(8) of the Immigration Act requires Convention refugees who are applying for landing to "be in possession of a valid and subsisting passport or travel document or a satisfactory identity document".
4. In the case of each of the Plaintiffs, Canada Immigration (hereinafter referred to as "Immigration") has refused to grant landing on the basis that he/she has not submitted a satisfactory identity document, pursuant to subsection 46.04(8) of the Immigration Act.
5. Plaintiffs Hussein Jama Aden, Fadumo Guire Ali, Fosiya Riyale, Aden Moallimaden, and Mohamed Mohamed Salah have submitted documents to Immigration which have not been accepted as satisfactory. Plaintiffs Sharmarke Mohamed Salah, Amina Nuri Jama Hassan, Ali Haji Mohamed, Madina Mohamud Hassan and Mariam Abdullahi Dirie do not possess any documents which establish their identity and nationality.

With respect to providing a satisfactory identity document is related to the situation in their country of origin, Somalia. Much of the country has been devastated by civil war. Thousands of Somali citizens have fled the country since the outbreak of civil war and since the outbreak of civil war and since January 1991, there has been no functioning postal service. As a result of the civil war many of the source records regarding the nationality and identity of Somali citizens have been destroyed, and any which might still exist are unobtainable.

7. In January 1991 Somalia has been without a recognized and functioning government. Without a government to issue identity documents such as passports, and identity cards, Somali refugees cannot renew existing documents or acquire new identity documents of any type.
8. Without a "satisfactory identity document" the Plaintiffs cannot be landed pursuant to normal immigration procedures for the landing of Convention refugees and their dependants.
9. Without permanent resident status, the Plaintiffs face significant barriers to becoming established in Canada. They cannot be reunited with their dependants and families who are still abroad because they cannot sponsor them as members of the "family class" for landing in Canada pursuant to section 6(2)(a) of the Immigration Act. They have no right to reenter Canada if they leave, pursuant to sections 4(1), 5(1), of the Immigration Act. They are not eligible for certain types of employment or for federal and provincial loans and bursaries for colleges and university. The Plaintiffs also suffer significant psychological and emotional trauma as a consequence of family separation and their unsettled immigration status.
10. With respect to persons determined to be Convention refugees in Canada who can satisfy the identity document requirement, the dependants abroad are included in the application for landing and the processing is commenced simultaneously. Normally, once the Convention refugee in Canada is landed, visas to dependants abroad are ready to be issued shortly thereafter.
11. It takes approximately twelve months for Immigration to process an approved application for landing made by someone determined to be a Convention refugee in Canada.
12. On January 31, 1997, pursuant to s.6(5) of the Immigration Act, a special class was created for Convention refugees who are unable to meet the "satisfactory identity document" requirement. The class is known as the Undocumented Convention Refugees in Canada Class (hereinafter referred to as "UCRCC").



13. The UCRCC applies to Convention refugees who are citizens or habitual residents of nations listed under Schedule XII of the Immigration Regulations. Currently, only two countries are listed for a maximum of two years (until January 31, 1999), at which time they are automatically removed, unless the time period is extended.
14. To qualify as a member of the UCRCC an applicant must be unable to satisfy the identity requirements set out in subsection 46.04(8) of the Immigration Act. Persons who are inadmissible to Canada for reasons of security or criminality are not eligible as members of the UCRCC.
15. A Convention refugee only becomes eligible for membership in the UCRCC five years from the date that he/she was determined to be a Convention refugee. One of the requirements for landing is that the refugee file a solemn declaration confirming the applicant's identity and the identities of his/her dependants in Canada for who landing is being sought.
16. Only dependants of Convention refugees who were included in the original application for permanent residence and who have been living in Canada since that time may be included in an application for landing made by a member of the UCRCC. A member of the UCRCC cannot commence an application to sponsor a dependant outside of Canada until he or she has been landed.
17. Pursuant to subsection 6(2) of the Immigration Act, only permanent residents of Canada, or Canadian citizens, may sponsor an application for landing made by a member of the "family class" (as defined by section 2 of the Immigration Regulations).
18. Only those dependants who meet the definition of "dependant son" and "dependant daughter" (as set out in the Immigration Regulations) at the time their applications for permanent residence are filed with the Canadian visa office will be able to be sponsored. In most cases, to qualify as a "dependant son" or a "dependant daughter", the child must be under the age of 19 years.
19. All of the applications for landing made by dependants of the Plaintiffs not in Canada will be processed through the Canadian High Commission in Nairobi, Kenya. The average time taken to process an application for landing made by a member of the "family class" (as defined in the Immigration Regulations) in Nairobi is twenty-five months.
20. As a direct result of the five year waiting period, and the failure to include overseas dependants in the UCRCC applications, Convention refugees processed under the class

These include a delay in family reunification, in most cases by at least eight years, and in some cases members of the class will lose forever the right to sponsor dependant sons and daughters, as a result of the passage of time.

21. The Plaintiff Hussein Jama Aden (hereinafter referred to as the "Plaintiff Aden") was born in Somalia on September 2, 1951. He is married and has five children.
22. The Plaintiff Aden and some members of his family were accepted as Convention refugees in Canada on May 13, 1993. On May 26, 1993, applications for landing which included the child in Canada, and the four children not in Canada were submitted. Copies of Plaintiff Aden's and his wife's Mogadishu identity documents were submitted. The Plaintiff Aden's Immigration file number is 3122-128165.
23. In February 1994, Immigration advised the Plaintiff that if original provided identity documents were not provided for all his children, the processing of his application for landing would be deferred.
24. Because of the situation in Somalia, described in paragraphs 7 and 8 of this Amended Amended Statement of Claim, it is not possible for the Plaintiff Aden to obtain any documentation concerning the identity of his children.
25. The Plaintiff Aden, his wife and the one child in Canada will be eligible for membership in the UCRCC on may 13, 1998. His four dependants abroad cannot be included in the application for landing, nor will processing of their applications for landing commence at that time.
26. The Plaintiff Aden could expect to be landed as a member of the UCRCC approximately twelve months after submission of his application, around May of 1999. At that point, he will become eligible to initiate a sponsorship application for any dependants remaining abroad.
27. By May of 1999 all of the Plaintiff Aden's children who are abroad will be over the age of 19, and no longer members of the family class, as that class is currently defined in the Immigration Regulations.
28. If the Plaintiff Aden is processed under the UCRCC, he will experience a significant delay in obtaining permanent status in Canada, and will lose forever the right to sponsor his children who remain overseas. The Plaintiff has suffered and will continue to suffer psychological harm from the separation from his family.

29. The Plaintiff Faadimo Guire Ali (hereinafter referred to as the "Plaintiff Ali") was born in Mogadishu, Somalia in 1958. She is married and has seven children.
30. Because she did not have any identity documents, the Plaintiff Ali obtained passports from the Embassy for the Somali Democratic Republic in Washington, D.C. This Embassy continued to function after the collapse of the Somali government, for the purpose of providing assistance and documents to Somali nationals.
31. The Plaintiff Ali and her accompanying family members were all recognized in Canada as Convention refugees on November 20, 1991. Applications for landing were submitted by the Plaintiff Ali, her children and her niece on January 23, 1992. The Plaintiff Ali's Immigration file number is 3122-122427.
32. After submitting her application for landing, the Plaintiff Ali located her husband in Kenya. Until she is granted permanent resident status in Canada, she cannot sponsor her husband. Consequently, he is unable to join her and their children in Canada.
33. In March 1995, the Plaintiff Ali requested an update of her application for landing from Canada Immigration. She was mailed a response which indicated that her identity documents had been refused and that [u]ntil such time as there is a policy change no/no [sic] landings are authorised without acceptable identity documents".
34. Because they are still waiting to be landed in Canada, the Plaintiff Ali and her family have suffered and continue to suffer hardship. She has been separated from her husband for six and a half years, during which time she has borne the full burden of raising her family. This has been a considerable hardship for her because her children have had to cope with a new country, culture and language. The fact that her husband is not with them, has made it more difficult for the family to become financially independent. In addition, as her children have finished high school, their chances of continuing their education, or getting a job are severely diminished because they are not landed.
35. The Plaintiff Ali became eligible for membership in the UCRCC on January 31st, 1997. Because dependants abroad cannot be included in applications for landing made by members of this class, the Plaintiff Ali will have to wait approximately twelve months from the time she submits her application for landing before commencing a sponsorship application for her husband.
36. The Plaintiff Fosiya Riyale (hereinafter the "Plaintiff Riyale") was accepted as a Convention refugee on September 15, 1993. On October 5, 1993, she applied for landing. The Plaintiff Riyale's Immigration file number is 3122-2888.

37. By letter from Immigration dated July 26, 1994, the Plaintiff was informed that, in order to be landed, she had to provide a "satisfactory identity document". In May 1995, she submitted her Somali identity card, which had been issued in Mogadishu in 1988. Since that time, the Plaintiff Riyale has had no further communication from Immigration.
38. The Plaintiff Riyale's two children, mother and three siblings are still in Somalia. The whereabouts of her husband are unknown. She will be eligible to apply for landing as a member of the UCRCC in September, 1998. She is not likely to be landed before September 1999. At that time, she can commence an application to sponsor her children, mother and siblings. If there are no complications in the processing of her family's applications for permanent residence, they are likely to be issued visas in 2001 or 2002.
39. The Plaintiff Aden Moallimaden (hereinafter referred to as the "Plaintiff Moallimaden") was accepted as a Convention refugee on November 24, 1992. On December 18, 1992, he submitted an application for landing. With his application he submitted a Somali passport, issued by the Somali Embassy in Washington, D.C. on October 4, 1991. The Plaintiff Moallimaden's Immigration file number is 3122-126606.
40. By letter dated January 18, 1993, the Plaintiff Moallimaden was informed that his application for landing had been provisionally accepted and that he would be landed once the necessary immigration requirements have been met. By letter dated December 21, 1993, he was asked to submit any valid and subsisting passport, travel document or other satisfactory identity document to Immigration. In response thereto, the Plaintiff submitted his birth card to Immigration.
41. The Plaintiff Moallimaden is still not landed. In response to a request for an update on his file, he was informed that Immigration was waiting to receive a reply from the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration regarding what identity documents would be acceptable. As he is not landed, the Plaintiff is having difficulty finding employment in Canada and being integrated into Canadian society.
42. The Plaintiff Moallimaden will not be eligible for membership in the UCRCC until November 24, 1997.
43. The Plaintiff Mohamed Mohamed Salah (hereinafter "the Plaintiff Salah") graduated from Ridgemont High School in the City of Ottawa, Ontario, obtaining exemplary marks. He came to Canada in 1990 when he was sixteen years old. The Plaintiff Salah is presently attending the University of Ottawa on a part time basis because he is unable to afford the fees required of a full time student.

44. The Plaintiff Salah was determined to be a Convention refugee on February 16, 1994. He applied for landing shortly thereafter. The Plaintiff Salah's Immigration file number is 3122-2638.
45. After the Plaintiff Salah applied for landing, he submitted two identity documents to Immigration - a Somali birth certificate and a municipal identity card. He also submitted the original marriage certificate of his parents, which Immigration refused to accept as a satisfactory identity document, as the Plaintiff Salah's name was not on the marriage certificate.
46. The Plaintiff Salah cannot be landed pursuant to UCRCC because he will not be eligible for membership in the UCRCC until after Somali's inclusion in Schedule XII to the Immigration Regulations has expired.
47. The Plaintiff Sharmarke Mohamed Salah (hereinafter referred to as the "Plaintiff Sharmarke Salah") is a student in the City of Ottawa. He did possess a birth certificate and a Somali passport, but both were destroyed in Mogadishu during the Somali civil war. He now has no identity documents. The Plaintiff Sharmarke Salah has six brothers and sisters in Canada who are Canadian citizens who can attest to his identity. The Plaintiff Sharmarke Salah's Immigration file number is 3122-123990.
48. The failure to land Mr. Salah has had the effect of preventing him from continuing his education.
49. The Plaintiff Sharmarke Salah was accepted as a Convention refugee on March 17, 1994. He cannot be landed pursuant to UCRCC because he will not be eligible for membership in the UCRCC during the currency of Somalia's inclusion in countries listed under Schedule XII of the Immigration Regulations.
50. The Plaintiff Amina Nuri Jama Hassan (hereinafter the "Plaintiff Amina Hassan") was a prominent businesswoman in Somalia. She fled Somalia in 1991 without identity documents because they had been seized by the government. She is unable to obtain new identity documents because of a lack of government in Somalia. The Plaintiff Amina Hassan has been unable to be reunited with her husband because she is not a landed immigrant and has been refused employment because of her lack of status in Canada. She has a son who is a Canadian citizen residing in Ottawa who can verify her identity.
51. The Plaintiff Amina Hassan was determined to be a Convention refugee on March 12, 1992. She became eligible for membership in the UCRCC on March 12, 1997. Her UCRCC application for landing cannot include her husband, who is outside of Canada. The processing of the application is likely to take twelve months, after which she can

52. The Plaintiff **Ali Haji Mohamed** (hereinafter the "Plaintiff Mohamed") is a student in the City of Ottawa. He arrived in Canada with his uncle, without his parents and without any identity documents. He left Somalia at the age of 15 when he was too young to have a passport or a driver's licence. His father was killed during the civil war and he does not know if his mother and brother are still alive in Somalia. The Plaintiff Mohamed has been encouraged by his school to apply for university entrance. However, as he is not a permanent resident of Canada, he is not eligible for any scholarships, loans or bursaries. Without financial assistance, the Plaintiff Mohamed is unable to attend university.
53. The Plaintiff Mohamed was determined to be a Convention refugee on March 11, 1993. He submitted an application for landing on March 29th, 1993. He will not be eligible for membership in the UCRCC until March 1998. The Plaintiff Mohamed's Immigration file number is 3122-127751.
54. The Plaintiff **Madina Mohamud Hassan** (hereinafter the "Plaintiff Madina Hassan") is a qualified biology teacher both at the high school and university levels. She fled her home in Mogadishu and eventually came to Canada with her two daughters where they were recognized as Convention refugees. Mrs. Hassan fled Somalia without any identity documents. Without permanent resident status, she cannot obtain any Canadian qualifications which would permit her to be employed in the field of biology, as either a scientist, teacher or professor.
55. The Plaintiff Madina Hassan was determined to be a Convention refugee on April 29, 1993. She submitted an application for landing on May 23rd, 1993. Included in her application were her two children in Canada, and her four children who are not in Canada. The whereabouts of her husband were unknown at the time of the application. The Plaintiff Madina Hassan's immigration file number is 3122-128277.
56. The Plaintiff Madina Hassan will not be able to sponsor her remaining children abroad unless she is landed before February 22, 1999, and her children abroad are able to submit their applications for permanent residence before that date. If the children do not submit applications prior to that date, they will be unable to be sponsored as dependant sons and daughters because of their ages.
57. The Plaintiff **Mariam Abdullahi Dirie** fled Somalia without identity documents. Mrs. Dirie and her two daughters were accepted as Convention refugees on April 20th, 1993, and submitted an application for landing on May 12th, 1993. She has not been landed

because she has no identity documents. Mrs. Dirie has been unable to further her education because she is not a landed immigrant and has been unable to see her husband and other relatives who reside in the United States. Mrs. Dirie has an uncle who resides in Toronto with his wife and children who are Canadian citizens and who can attest to the identity of Mrs. Dirie.

The Plaintiffs claim that:

58. Section 46.04(8) of the Immigration Act has the effect of discriminating against the plaintiffs on the basis of national origin, contrary to section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.
59. Section 46.04(8) of the Immigration Act states that landing shall not be granted until the Plaintiffs are in possession of a valid and subsisting passport or travel document or a satisfactory identity document. Some of the Plaintiffs have no identity documents, and other have had their identity documents refused by the Respondent's officials as not being "satisfactory identity documents". Somali nations are unable to obtain existing documents from Somalia, and cannot acquire new identity documents because of their country of origin. The Plaintiff's inability to satisfy section 46.04(8) of the Immigration Act arises because of their country of origin, Somalia.
60. Consequently, section 46.04(8) of the Immigration Act has the effect of creating a distinction between Convention refugees on the basis of national origin. This distinction is with discrimination, in that the effect is to deny equal benefit of the law to Somali Convention refugees, on the basis of their national origin.
61. Section 46.04(8) of the Immigration Act is not saved by the introduction of the UCRCC. UCRCC does not apply to all the Plaintiffs, as some will not become eligible within the currency of Somalia's inclusion in UCRCC.
62. Those Plaintiffs who will qualify for inclusion in UCRCC continue to be discriminated against on the basis of national origin. Applicants under UCRCC must wait five years more for landing than other Convention refugees. During this waiting period they continue to suffer other adverse consequential effects. Applications processed under UCRCC cannot include overseas dependants, which results in a significant delay in family reunification, and in some cases a permanent loss of the right to sponsor close family members.

The Plaintiffs therefore seek the following relief:

- (a) a Declaration that subsection 46.04(8) of the Immigration Act as being contrary to Section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.
- (b) an Order striking down subsection 46.04(8) of the Immigration Act as being contrary to Section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.
- (c) In the alternative, that section 46.04(8) shall be read to include a provision that in cases where satisfactory documentation cannot be obtained because of the country of origin, that other evidence of identity shall be accepted as meeting the requirements of the section.
- (d) such further and other declaratory relief as counsel may advise and this Honourable Court permit.
- (e) their costs in this action.

The Plaintiffs propose that this action be heard in Ottawa, in the English language.

DATED AT OTTAWA this 28th day of May, 1997.

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Chantal Tie

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Michael Bossin

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Laurie Joe

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