

Eritrean Refugees in the Shimelba Refugee Camp, Ethiopia
Prepared by the Cultural Orientation Department of JVA/Nairobi

Overview

The Church World Service Overseas Processing Entity, JVA/Nairobi, is responsible for providing cultural orientation to U.S.-bound refugees in the Shimelba Refugee Camp in Ethiopia. These refugees are part of a Priority 2 group referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The group, approximately 6,880 refugees in total, is made up primarily of those from the Tigrinya, Saho, and Kunama tribes.

The Cultural Orientation Regional Coordinator at JVA/Nairobi has nearly 10 years experience in the United States Refugee Admissions Program, having served at the local affiliate level and as the Deputy Representative for Operations at the Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) in Accra, Ghana. The Cultural Orientation Trainers are Kenyan nationals with experience in intercultural communication and education/training. They have a collective proficiency in English, Kiswahili, and Somali.

History of Caseload

The Eritrean refugees first crossed into Ethiopia in May 2000 after the 1998-2000 border conflict. Most fled Eritrea to avoid forced conscription into the army, since the Eritrean government mandates that all male citizens enroll into national service on their seventeenth birthday. (Currently, Eritrea has the world's largest percentage of a country's citizenry drafted into national service.) National service can either be of a military nature or a civilian, "work gang" nature, and the term of service is often indefinite. Many have fled conscription and come to Shimelba, a refugee camp just 25 kilometers (air distance) from the Eritrean/Ethiopian border.

UNHCR numbers indicate that, of those refugees in the Shimelba Refugee Camp, approximately 60% are Tigrinya. Roughly speaking, about half the cases in the P2 group were born in present day Ethiopia, were deported by the Ethiopian Government between 1996-2000, and then later fled back to Ethiopia. The remainder of the cases are people that were born in present day Eritrea (although part of Ethiopia until Eritrean independence), and the first time they ever stepped in present day Ethiopia was when they fled.

The Kunama, the second largest group, are generally pastoralists who lived along the disputed border and have little to no experience in an urban setting. The Eritrean government accused them of having supported the Ethiopian military invasion. Ironically, the Kunama originally lived in northern Ethiopia, the area in which the Shimelba Refugee Camp is situated. For some Kunama, being in Shimelba is akin to "returning home," excepting the irony that they now are refugees in their own homeland.

There are other smaller ethnic groups, namely the Saho, who are predominantly Sunni Muslims; the Amhara, a small group of Ethiopians who have intermarried with their Eritrean neighbors; and the Afar and Bilen.

Camp Environment

The Shimelba Refugee Camp is located 33 kilometers southwest of Shiraro, the district administrative center of Western Tigray. It is approximately 25 kilometers (air distance) from the disputed border with Eritrea and about 1300 kilometers from the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

The camp is run by the Ethiopian government with UNHCR oversight. There is a “central committee” that is elected by the camp population, and the committee represents the refugees on various issues, liaising with NGOs and the Ethiopian government.

There are two NGOs with presence in the camp, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and ZOA, a German nonprofit organization. IRC supplies clean drinking water, sanitation, education and support for the disabled and youth; assistance to women who have suffered sexual or domestic violence; and life skills training to those who have been approved for travel to the United States. ZOA runs some training programs that assist the refugees acquire income generating skills.

Refugees are not allowed to work outside the camp, and as a result, fewer than 10% are employed. A few have businesses begun from funds sent to them by their relatives in the U.S. These businesses have been set up in the central part of the camp and that section of the camp has become known as “little Asmara”, after the Eritrean capital. There are beauty salons, restaurants, and retail shops and some refugees have been hired to work at these places. Other refugees have found employment with UNHCR’s implementing partners.

As so few are able to work, boredom governs the refugees’ daily life. Most spend their time playing cards, drinking coffee, chatting in small groups, or watching DSTV transmitted football (soccer) games and movies.

Camp life is especially difficult for women. As the population is overwhelmingly male, there is a great competition amongst the men for women in the camp. Many times women are forced into marriage, face sexual harassment or are raped. There is a vigorous campaign against gender based violence in the camp.

CO Classes

For security reasons, JVA/Nairobi CO staff do not travel to the Shimelba Refugee Camp. The refugees are instead brought to Shire, a western Tigray regional hub approximately two to three hours drive from the camp, where the team secures a hotel hall or nearby rental building for training purposes.

A deliberate effort is made to restrict the class size to an average of 25 to a maximum of 30 participants so that the training can be more participatory. As is the case in the camps, male

participants outnumber female participants, and the trainers make a concerted effort to ensure that there is active participation among both genders.

Classes are generally divided by language so as to limit the number of interpreters needed. In Shire, interpreters are generally needed for Tigrinya, Saho, and Kunama; they are secured with the assistance of the onsite partner, the International Organization for Migration.

The intensive training is conducted over three days, for six hours a day. The objectives of the training are threefold: 1) To inform the participants of the processes and systems that will affect their resettlement experience; 2) To help participants develop realistic expectations of life in the United States; and 3) To inform the participants of the skills and attitudes necessary for a more positive acculturation experience.

The training covers all topics outlined in the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) “Welcome to the United States” guidebook, and sessions are largely learner-centered and participatory, taking into consideration the unique needs of the group receiving training. Trainers use role plays, group exercises, debates, pictures, and videos to convey key concepts. As the Kunama have had limited exposure to modern life, sessions with them also include a visit to one of the onsite restrooms so that they can become familiar with western toilets.

A student workbook developed by JVA/Nairobi is given to each participant. Depending on the level of the class, activities from the workbook may be done individually or as part of a group, or they may be assigned as homework for the evening. A “Welcome to the United States” guidebook is given to each principal applicant.

Sessions end with a post training evaluation conducted to gauge the participants’ understanding of the material and to determine which training methods were most effective, and certificates are handed out to all participants.

Hopes, Fears and Questions

Each cultural orientation session begins with the trainer asking three questions: “What do you know about the United States? What do you fear about the United States? What do you expect from your life in the United States?”

As has been previously mentioned, a large percentage of the population in Shimelba fled forced conscription into the Eritrean army. For many of these, the knowledge that they must register for selective service after arrival is a source of consternation. Others are concerned about the American right to own firearms. The trainers inform the refugees of the requirements for selective service registration and note that there are U.S. laws put in place to regarding firearm ownership. This has helped to address some of their fears.

These refugees, like most, aspire to a better life through education and employment opportunities, and there is concern over the current global economic crisis. A recurrent question in CO is how the situation will affect their ability to secure employment. They are concerned about the short-term financial assistance extended to them by the U.S. government.

As the Kunama are not familiar with most modern amenities, they have a fear of the apartments in which they'll live in the United States. Most specifically, they have a fear of fires in these apartments. To address these fears, the trainers spend significant time discussing home and personal safety. They instruct the refugees on how to dial 9-1-1 and to alert emergency responders to their emergency, and they show a video regarding the use of 9-1-1 as well as a housing video developed by Mercy Housing.

The Saho, who are predominantly Muslim, are concerned about whether or not they will be allowed to observe their prayer schedule at the workplace in the United States.

The majority of those from P-2 Shimelba Group are hopeful about the new opportunities that await them in the United States. They are eager to find work, and hope to someday continue their education.

Strengths and Challenges

The youthful and determined nature of this caseload is perhaps its most striking characteristic. These refugees, a majority of whom are high school educated, are eager to take advantage of new opportunities in the United States.

A majority of the caseload is literate with most having had some formal education. Many have completed Grade 10 and some have been university educated. As English is taught as a second language in most schools, approximately 25% speak some level of English.

The challenges anticipated to be faced by this group are as follows:

Cultural Adjustment

Greater cultural adjustment will be required of the Kunama refugees who, being traditionally pastoralist, are not as exposed to urban life. These refugees have little to no familiarity with many modern amenities.

Limited Work Experience

As the Eritrean government requires that men enroll to national service at the age of 17 and the Ethiopian government doesn't allow refugees to work outside of the camp, many will lack what could be described as traditional work experience. It's important to note, however, that some will have worked at small businesses in the camp and others will have received vocational skills training. Vocational skills training provided in the camp include carpet making, electrical installation, dying and silk printing, tailoring, knitting, embroidery and leather craftwork. It's also important to note that the caseload has expressed an eagerness to work and support themselves once in the United States.

Pre-literacy

The Kunama have had little formal education and approximately 90% are not literate in their own language. For these refugees, learning English will be more challenging.

Considerations for Domestic Service Providers

As this group is comprised largely of those who fled forced conscription into the Eritrean army, there are a number of single males. It's anticipated that these males may need to be housed together in apartments in the United States. The group is aware of this and they appreciate that this will help them to save to save money. The majority of the caseload is employment eligible and is anxious to begin work.

Support services, including life skills training, are being provided to those approved for resettlement to the United States. These support services are provided by UNHCR implementing partners in the camp.

While training has been provided to the Kunama regarding many modern amenities, more training will need to be provided after their arrival to the United States. It's recommended that service providers focus on the use of bathroom facilities as many Kunama, Kunama children in particular, have a fear of western toilets.