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The Cape of Refuge

■ Cape Town is "host" to a new kind of visitor — the hapless refugees fleeing the horror of genocide in countries all over Africa.

IRVING STEYN
Weekend Argus Reporter

THEY are the forgotten people of Africa — afraid, traumatised, homeless and workless, shunned and sometimes assaulted in a strange country thousands of kilometres from home.

Some of them are as young as 16, others have left behind their mothers and fathers, wives and children, not knowing whether they are alive or dead.

They are the refugees who fled their home countries in a war-torn continent to make their way south, so far south that they could go no further.

Now, they are here in Cape Town, fruitlessly seeking work and relying on charity to keep them alive until the day they can return — an ambition they all have.

For the past six months or more, they have arrived in dribs and drabs, some overland via Namibia, others by boat — escaping the turmoil in Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia and Mozambique.

They also come from Kenya, Angola, Sudan, Ethiopia and Tanzania.

They all have one pursuit in common: A happier, more secure life in what they perceived to be Africa's land of milk and honey — South Africa.

Some get documents from the United Nations refugee centre in Namibia, then make their way to Cape Town by long-distance lorries; others have been given temporary documentation by the Department of Home Affairs.

Somehow or other, they find themselves at the mosque in District Six, from where they are referred to the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) in Athlone.

"I really don't know how they know to go to the mosque. It seems to be some kind of

bush telegraph," said the MJC's Imam Gassan Solomon.

Over the past few months, about 120 refugees have made their way to the MJC, but the numbers appear to be dwindling.

"It seems that countries to the north are getting another bush telegraph message — only, this time, it is that South Africa is not the land of promise it was made out to be," said Imam Solomon.

While here and there some of the refugees find casual jobs,

they are resented and are known to have been beaten up in townships.

It's not so much that they are foreign, it's that they are seen to be competing for jobs that should rightfully belong to South Africans.

However, some do get jobs and drift away, to be replaced by others.

The MJC building, although not small, is straining at the seams and at times 20 refugees share a room.

Traditionally, the Rwandans

and Somalis are not known to be the closest of friends, but although members of both countries are at the centre, so far no problem has arisen between the two groups.

Recently, the Cape Refugee Forum was formed to address the problem. It consists of various church and welfare bodies.

The MJC, backed by leading Muslim businesses, rented an empty warehouse in Lansdowne/Philippi which is now being fitted out to accommodate up to 150 refugees.

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Picture: ANDREW INGRAM, Weekend Argus.

SPOKESMAN: Somali refugee spokesman Muhamed Mustapha Ali in the bare refugee centre being prepared in a warehouse in Lansdowne/Philippi.



□ **GETTING ORGANISED:** Imam Solomon discusses plans for the new centre with refugee Ismail Ahmed Jama, left, Muslim fieldworker Abdul Bashier Albridge, centre, and refugees Mohamed Abdullahi and Huhammed Mustapha Ali.

Reluctant traveller's tale of regret and despair

MUHAMED Mustapha Ali, 24, decided in November he'd had enough of the fighting in his country and left. He speaks English well and as a result is the leader of the Somali refugees, most of whom do not understand any English.

"We lived in Mogadishu and I fled simply to save my life,

even though I left all my family behind. I was still at school, but everything was so chaotic," he said.

He stowed away on a fishing boat and when he was discovered he was taken to Maputo in Mozambique. From there he made his way through Swaziland to Johannesburg.

"I had a bit of money and was able to pay my way to Johannesburg. However, once I was there and saw what was what I decided to come to Cape Town because I thought perhaps things were better here."

He reached Cape Town on December 3 and has been looking for a job ever since.

"I have written to my family to tell them where and how

I am. The whole exercise has been in vain. I will have to go back," he said.

Ismail Ahmed Jama, 28, also from Mogadishu, also stowed away on a ship — "I don't know what kind" — in July. His presence was also discovered, and, like fortunate Muhamed, no action was taken against him and he left the ship in Durban.

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□ **SOMALIS:** Imam Gassan Solomon of the Muslim Judicial Council talks to Somali refugees Mohamed Abdullai, centre, and Ismail Ahmed Jama.

Pictures: ANDREW INGRAM, Weekend Argus.

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Desperate plea for aid from SA

THIS touching letter, unchanged, was sent to Weekend Argus this week by Ebrahim Ba, who gave an address in Manenberg.

It has become difficult for the Rwanda refefees residing in South Africa because of lack of camp and the way to meet up with the living condition in the society.

I am one of the refefee who cried out on the 28 October 1994 because of the condition I am facing in the country. In fact I have try the best I can to get job, but it wasn't possible for me.

More than two hundred Rwandas are roaming on the street of Cape Town every day, begging for food and clothes and majority of them sleeps on street because there's no accomodation for them.

A fellow refefee told me that his greatest problem was feeding, and another said my problem is job and accomodation. When I got this I will never go back because my famile has been destroyed.

Well, I am appealing to the government and the people of South Africa to help the Rwanda refefee to organise their self before their condition will become deplorable.

Perhaps the most remarkable problem among the Rwanda refefees is that most them lost all their famile and because of this we are distress. We need much help from the government of South Africa.