

The Office of Refugee Resettlement



Jeff Topping / Reuters

The Refugee Act of 1980 – 30 Year Anniversary

Thirty years ago today, the historic and far-reaching Refugee Act of 1980 was signed into law by President Jimmy Carter. This Act, spurred by the fall of Vietnam in 1975, not only incorporated the internationally-accepted definition of "refugee," but standardized resettlement services for all refugees admitted to the U.S. Since its enactment, nearly three million refugees who were once persecuted in their home countries have resettled in the Land of the Free.

On this day, Americans should be proud of our country's tradition of providing a safe haven for the oppressed. This 30-year anniversary should also serve as a reaffirmation of our country's enduring commitment to preserve human life, rights and dignity.

Refugees have witnessed some of the greatest struggles our world has ever known. They have endured hardship and pain, and often experienced atrocities beyond comprehension. Many have watched loved ones murdered before their very eyes, helpless to defend themselves. Others have walked thousands of miles in search

of safety for their family, while hundreds of thousands more have spent years living in squalid refugee camps. A group of refugees, commonly referred to as the "1972 Burundians," lived in refugee camps in Tanzania after fleeing violence in their home country of Burundi. They arrived at the camps eight years prior to the Refugee Act of 1980; they remained there twenty years after.

Every year, the U.S. President determines the number of refugees who are admissible for resettlement in this country. In 2010, President Obama has set the figure at 80,000. Established by the Refugee Act of 1980, the Office of Refugee, within the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, will help these refugees transition into their new lives in the U.S. by providing them benefits and services – including refugee medical assistance, employment services, and case management – that enable them to achieve self-sufficiency and become active members of American society.

The American public has also played a significant role in supporting the resettlement of these newcomers. Numerous communities and non-profit organizations across the country have provided resources and opened their

arms to refugees who were once persecuted in their home country for reasons such as religion, race, nationality and political opinion.

Americans have donated winter clothes to Hmong refugees who resettled in Minnesota and experienced their first snowy winter; they have coached refugee youth in Georgia who play soccer as an outlet from their difficult past; and they have worked countless hours guiding refugees toward success into American society by teaching English language classes.

As a result of America's generosity and its committed citizens, refugees have excelled in the U.S. While refugees may have been hopeless, their futures and those of their children are full of new promise. Refugees have become graduates of colleges and gone on to become doctors, lawyers, U.S. Congressmen, successful businessmen and women, and American civil servants.

Refugees have contributed to the very fabric of our country through their diversity, culture, and economic contributions, all while representing one of America's greatest legacies: its immigrant heritage.

The courage and resiliency exhibited by refugees demonstrate the will of the human spirit and its ability to overcome adversity. We commend President Carter, the late Ted Kennedy, and the other Members of Congress who, through their conviction and desire to protect those less fortunate, enacted the Refugee Act of 1980. And for those refugees who now call America home, we are honored to have you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eskinder Negash".

Eskinder Negash
Director, ORR

Accomplishments of Refugees in America

During the past three decades of refugee resettlement, refugees have made considerable contributions to our society. They have enriched our culture and diversity; they have made significant economic contributions, including the creation of many small businesses; and they have, perhaps most importantly, taught us about the power of the human spirit and the will to overcome adversity. Below are just a few examples of the many accomplishments, personal victories, and contributions that refugees have made in the United States.

Dr. Gebisa Ejeta, Distinguished Professor of Agronomy at Purdue University, was named the recipient of the 2009 World Food Prize for research leading to the increased production and availability of sorghum in his native Africa. Ejeta, a plant breeder and geneticist, created sorghum hybrids resistant to drought and Striga, which is a parasitic weed commonly referred to as witch weed. Originally from Ethiopia, Ejeta saw firsthand the devastating effects of drought and Striga on sorghum crops in his own country; sorghum is a major food crop for more than 500 million people on the African continent. The World Food Prize, awarded yearly, is considered the Nobel Prize of agriculture.

Lopez Lomong, one of the "Lost Boys" from the Sudan, made the 2008 U.S. Olympic team for the men's 1,500 meter event. Not only was he given the opportunity to represent his country, but he was chosen by his peers to carry the

American flag during the opening ceremony. Lomong's athletic achievements on the track field mirror the personal victories he has experienced since resettling in the U.S. as a Sudanese refugee minor in 2001. Lomong is currently involved with the non-profit organization Sudan Sunrise, which is a movement to foster reconciliation and solidarity amongst Southern Sudanese Christians, Darfurian Muslims, and all Sudanese. Lomong is working with others in his native village of Kimotong to rebuild the Church where he had been abducted at gunpoint as a six-year old.

U.S. Congressman Anh "Joseph" Cao was born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1967. When he was eight years old, he escaped to America with two of his siblings. Cao learned English and went on to earn a physics degree from Baylor University, a Master's degree in philosophy from Fordham University, and a law degree from Loyola Law School. He became the in-house legal counsel for Boat People S.O.S, Inc., an organization that helps poor Vietnamese and other minorities. In 2007, Governor Jindal appointed Cao to help ensure fair voting as a member of the Board of Elections for Orleans Parish. Cao was also elected to lead the Louisiana Republican Party on the parish and state levels, and was soon elected as a delegate to the Republican National Convention. On December 6, 2008, Cao was elected as Louisiana's 2nd Congressional District Representative, making him the first Vietnamese-American elected to the United States Congress.

Deogratias "Deo" Niyizonkiza describes his home country as "Hell in paradise." Deo was a refugee from war-torn Burundi who escaped his homeland in 1993 and came to America. Unable to speak English, Deo struggled in his new country and for a time was homeless in Central Park, where he worked odd jobs. After a chance encounter with a nun, he was introduced to a retired couple, Charlie and Nancy Wolf, who had traveled to Africa and knew of the atrocities that took place in Rwanda. The Wolfs agreed to take Deo into their home free of charge. Deo studied English and, with the help and generosity of the Wolfs, was eventually able to enroll at Columbia University's American Language Program before applying to its School of General Studies. After graduating, Deo attended the Harvard School of Public Health. While there he met Dr. Paul Farmer, one of the founders of Partners in Health, which is a public health organization that incorporates a community-based approach. In 2005, Deo opened a health center called Village Health Works in his hometown in Burundi, the rural village of Kigutu. During its first year-and-a-half, Village Health Works served approximately 30,000 people.

These are but a few examples of the astounding contributions made by refugees. It is America who has been the beneficiary of their grace, dignity, and perseverance.