

# Finding refuge at York: one student's story

Local WUSC committee assists student refugees

By NAOMI MINWALLA

The uprooting of refugees is often an involuntary, emotional, and chaotic event. Family, friends, homes, country, and identity disappear. The additional loss of academic opportunities for student refugees can only intensify their struggles to escape the abyss into which they have fallen. As one author appropriately stated, "... once a refugee, no longer a student."

York University is one of the 80 universities and colleges in Canada which has established a local committee of the World University Service of Canada (WUSC). By coordinating with WUSC's Student Refugee Sponsorship Program, York's local committee has sponsored two student refugees since 1987. To qualify, a refugee must meet York's academic requirements, obtain a score of 580 on the "Test of English as a Foreign Language," and be recognized as a refugee by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Fisseha Abebe was the first WUSC-sponsored refugee to come to York University. His past struggles illustrate what millions of other refugees are still experiencing today. As a mathematics student at the Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia, Fisseha was forced to flee from his country in 1975.

Workers and students who sought more democracy in Ethiopia revolted against the government of Emperor Haile Selassie. The subsequent military intervention and imprisonment of Selassie instigated more rebellion leaving the country in a state of civil war.

In 1978, the Soviet Union provided support to the military regime in Ethiopia. By introducing a Russian intelligence network of "Local Associations," the regime was able to repress those who disagreed. Their attitude, as Fisseha recalls, was "If you are not on our side, then you are the enemy."

Fisseha vividly remembers the persecutions, death and imprisonment. "We were forced to live in crowded areas and change our sleeping places from day to day so we wouldn't be spotted. They came and took you to prison at night. I was imprisoned for one year and am lucky to have even survived."

In desperation, Fisseha walked by

night to Sudan. Since no opportunities were available for him, he proceeded to Kenya, where he met Hugh Pilkington — a British man who, in coordination with WUS-United Kingdom, dedicated his life to assisting student refugees.

Pilkington sent Fisseha to a university in Sri Lanka. After four years, Fisseha received a Bachelor's Degree in Mathematics. He then returned to Kenya and helped Pilkington organize educational opportunities for student refugees. In the back of his mind, Fisseha hoped to eventually complete his graduate work in Canada.

Shortly after speaking at York on a 1986 WUSC-sponsored tour, Pilkington was hit by a car and met an untimely death. His efforts on Fisseha's behalf were taken over by York's

Resource Centre for Refugee Studies. Through coordination with WUSC, his case was eventually processed, and Fisseha was able to begin his academic career at York in September, 1987. He is now a graduate student in statistics, and will receive his Master's Degree this summer.

The humanitarian efforts of a few individuals working through WUSC has turned Fisseha's hope into reality. He says "Intellectually, I have gained a lot. My professors at York are encouraging, and they have given me lots of insights into problems. I am passionate about my subject and am excited about working as a statistician. None of this would be possible if I hadn't come to Canada. No other Canadian organization sees refugees with the same eye as WUSC.

They know that there are potentially good refugee students, and they make a genuine attempt to bring them to Canada."

Having experienced WUSC's selection process, Fisseha says that "It is good because it's refined. They don't narrow your acceptance down to an application form. They also conduct personal interviews in which they fairly compare the candidates and make an unbiased choice. No one is judged solely by a piece of paper."

According to WUSC, students have a minimal chance of obtaining Canadian refugee status by applying through normal immigration channels. This is because they are not entering the labour market immediately, nor are they applying as part of a family unit. The only route for many of those student refugees is to

apply for a WUSC sponsorship.

Since 1980, WUSC has sponsored over 160 student refugees in Canada. The York chapter plans to bring one student refugee to York each year. Our local committee is committed to providing refugees with financial and moral support for a minimum of one year. Through a special agreement with Immigration Canada, WUSC in Ottawa expedites the immigration process. If accepted, the refugee will be considered a landed immigrant upon arrival in Canada, and will therefore be eligible to work while studying. For example, in addition to taking a full course load, Fisseha worked as a research assistant last year and a teacher's assistant this year.

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# Physician speaks of Somali torture

By HOWARD KAMAN

"He was hung upside down by his ankles, apparently on a pulley so that he could be raised and lowered. While in this position he was beaten with sticks, punched and kicked. His head was forced into a bucket of water and held down by the torturer's feet. He had difficulty accepting that it was real, and lived in the anticipation that he was going to be killed."

—Excerpt from testimony given by a Somali refugee to Canadian officials, upon arriving in Canada

Wendell Block believes this story.

Block is a doctor who examines refugees before their immigration hearings. In a presentation hosted by Amnesty International, Block spoke at Bethune College last Thursday, March 2. During a regular refugee hearing, which determines whether the person stays or leaves Canada, Block's reports are often used as evidence to support or debunk a refugee's story.

He bases his results on an intense examination, including both psychological and physical factors.

An examination, he explains, consists of an "interview for two or three hours depending on how long the story is and whether we're using an interpreter or not, and encouraging them to describe to me the kind of experiences they've had in their home country, their prison condi-



ILLUSTRATION: BRIAN KNOG

tions, the torture they've experienced and so on.

"And then [they] describe to me the kind of physical and psychological and social symptoms that they're still having problems with."

Block continues with an examination to find all the physical scars

remaining from the refugee's "torture experience," and determines whether they're consistent with the refugee's story.

Many of Block's cases have come from Somalia, a poor African country located between Ethiopia and the Indian Ocean.

The country has been run by a dictatorship since 1969 and, as Block explained, "The only thing that works is their National Security Service—a system of imprisonment, intimidation and torture that keeps everyone frightened."

According to a 1988 report published by Amnesty International, there have been many cases like the one described above, and most people are unaware of it.

"To me," Block explained, "[Somalia] became an example of the hidden nature of torture and the things people suffer in this world without anyone knowing about it. I barely knew where Somalia was and had to look it up on a map. I knew nothing about the culture or the people there, or its history."

Block went on to describe the history of the torn nation that began as an Italian-British colony under American protection.

Despite American influence in the country, several civilian governments failed economically. In what would later be dubbed as the "October Revolution," of 1969, Major General Mohamed Siad Barre, an army commander, staged a military coup, and suspended the constitution. After dismantling the National Assembly and banning all political parties, he took power in a

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