

The “Somali Invasion”

by Deepa Rao

The U.S. Committee for Refugees says that each year, the United States accepts between 70,000 and 90,000 refugees. Refugees are immigrants who are forced to move because the situation in their own countries is so dangerous they fear they will die if they stay. With such large numbers moving here each year, it is rare when a small group of resettled refugees makes national news, especially a group that has settled in a very small, very quiet city. However, in 2002, racial tensions between the newly transitioned Somalis and some residents of Lewiston, Maine made front page news across the country.

Settling in Lewiston

Through government resettlement programs, Somali refugees have been placed in cities and small towns in Washington, Georgia, North Dakota, and Minnesota. Lewiston, Maine was not on this list of resettlement sites but it quickly became home to a large population of Somalis.

The Somalis living in Georgia were the first to move up north to snowy Lewiston. They wanted to leave because they had been placed in an area that had a high rate of violence and drugs. The Somalis worried about their safety and more importantly about the negative influences on their children. The Somali elders sent out several men to different parts of the United States to search for a better place to raise their families. The Somalis chose Lewiston, Maine because it was a very safe and small city (35,000 residents). They thought they could have a better life there. Reports in Maine newspapers claimed that over 1000 Somalis settled there by September 2002.

The Somalis' transition to Lewiston was not an easy one. In this mostly white community, their presence was immediately known. Some Lewiston community members welcomed the Somalis and saw their coming as an opportunity to increase the diversity of the city. Others saw it as bringing unwanted change and draining the city's resources. Some worried that the public assistance available to Lewiston's poor would shrink while the new Somali community got resettlement help.

The Letter

In October 2002, then Mayor Laurier Raymond responded to the large influx of Somalis to the Lewiston area by publishing a letter to the Somali elders, the leaders of the Somali community, in the local newspaper. He stressed that, “The Somali community must exercise some discipline and reduce the stress on our limited finances and our generosity.” He claimed that the newcomers put a burden on the city and school resources. Although he stated that to date there had been sufficient funds, he claimed that continued arrivals would “tax the city's finances” and produce “negative results for all.”

This letter came as a shock to the Somali elders, the Somali community, and their supporters. The Somalis accused the mayor of being racist and bigoted. They argued that they were not a drain on the city's resources. Since their arrival, the city's budget had increased tremendously because of receiving federal money to help with the Somalis' relocation. In addition, over 400 Somalis, nearly half of the adult population, were working, three new Somali businesses had opened up,

As the news media picked up on this story they began to refer to it as the “Somali Invasion.” What do you think of this as a title? What does the word invasion imply? Does it sound positive or negative?

and many Somalis were now renting apartments in a deserted downtown.

The Rally

The mayor's letter incited racial tensions in the community and attracted negative national media coverage as well as the support of hate organizations throughout the country. Despite this negative attention the mayor did not retract his letter or apologize to the Somali community.

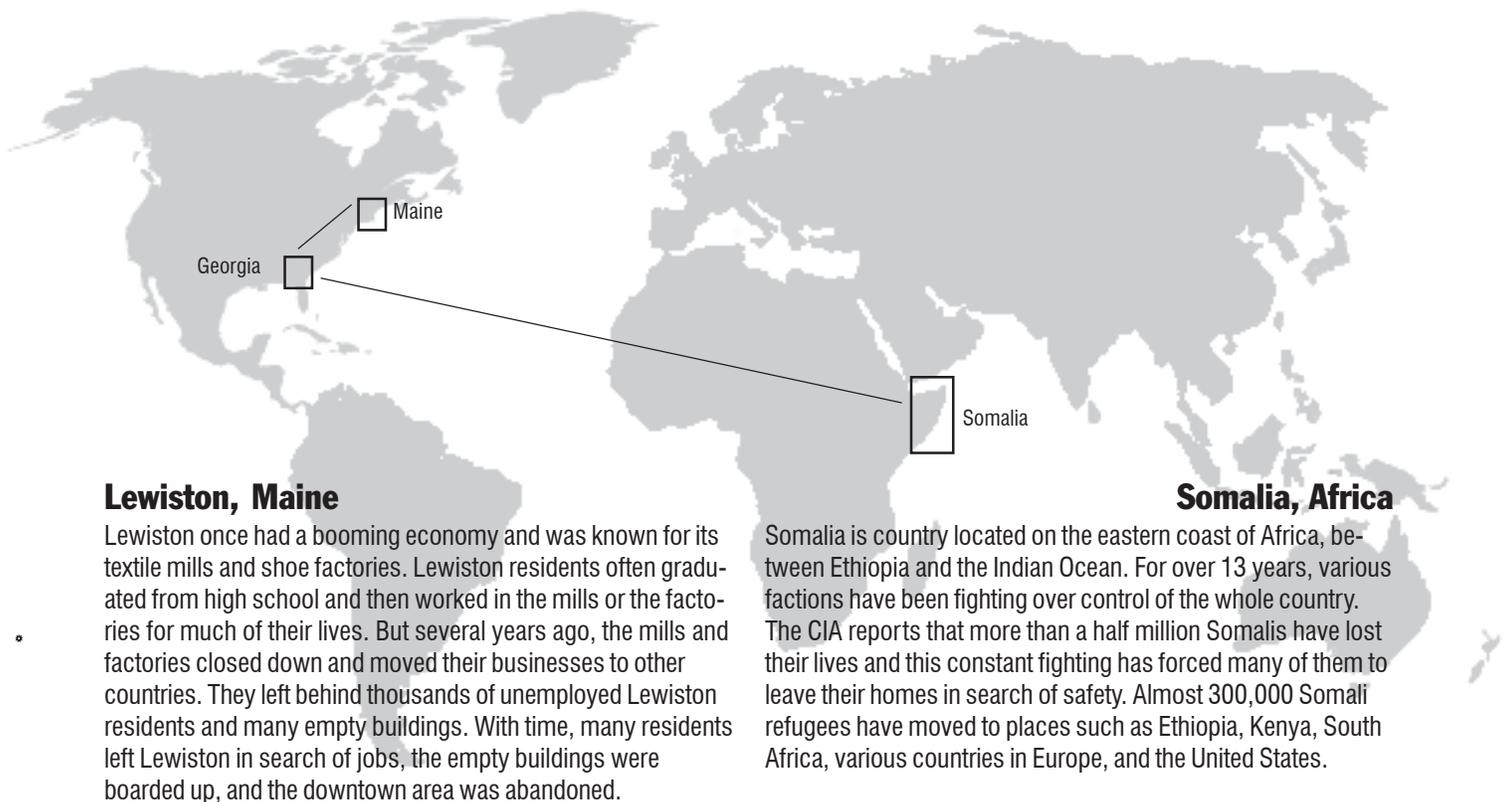
In January 2003, the hate organizations held an anti-immigrant rally. This rally drew a small crowd of members, most of whom came from other parts of the United States. On the same day, over 4,500 people gathered together to show their support for ethnic and cultural diversity. Thankfully, the rallies were peaceful.

More than two years have passed since these rallies. Life in Lewiston has returned to normal and the Somali presence in the city has been a blessing rather than a burden. The Somalis

have created organizations such as Somali Community Services and the United Somali Women of Maine to help new Somali residents get situated. The Somalis have had an impact not only on the racial makeup of the community but also on its struggling economy. The Somalis have opened new businesses and are buying property. Additional funding from the federal government has also been injected into Lewiston's economy to provide educational support.

While Lewiston's response to a new refugee population might not be a model, it is an example of what can happen when a city is not prepared for immigration. What lessons can be learned from the experience in Lewiston? How will the next American town respond?

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Lewiston, Maine

Lewiston once had a booming economy and was known for its textile mills and shoe factories. Lewiston residents often graduated from high school and then worked in the mills or the factories for much of their lives. But several years ago, the mills and factories closed down and moved their businesses to other countries. They left behind thousands of unemployed Lewiston residents and many empty buildings. With time, many residents left Lewiston in search of jobs, the empty buildings were boarded up, and the downtown area was abandoned.

Somalia, Africa

Somalia is a country located on the eastern coast of Africa, between Ethiopia and the Indian Ocean. For over 13 years, various factions have been fighting over control of the whole country. The CIA reports that more than a half million Somalis have lost their lives and this constant fighting has forced many of them to leave their homes in search of safety. Almost 300,000 Somali refugees have moved to places such as Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, various countries in Europe, and the United States.