Cultures clash within Crawford's melting pot; Somalian students find few friends on campus

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The trouble didn't start in October. The brawls only announced it. They were brief but fierce.

Minutes after school let out at San Diego's Crawford High on Oct. 28, hundreds of students poured into the street. The melee was on. Between 20 and 30 teen-agers went at each other with shoes, sticks, belts, canes and rocks.

Combatants comprised virtually every ethnic group in attendance at the high school. But, said Vice Principal Ernest Smith, "The two predominant groups were African-American and Somali."

It lasted about 10 minutes, by the estimate of Julie Elliott, Crawford's principal. School police and staff intervened. A San Diego police helicopter ordered the crowd to disperse.

A second street fight broke out the following afternoon at the edge of Colina del Sol Community Park, a few blocks away. Police cars and the vehicles of private citizens were pelted, and one motorcycle officer was struck with a rock.

Tensions have receded in the past month. But everyone involved has seen these lulls before. No one's offering a guarantee this one is permanent.

For Somalis, the brawls were simply the latest eruption of an ongoing series of smaller conflicts that could be titled "Somalis Vs. Everybody Else."

In the past, many Somalian children in the San Diego neighborhood of City Heights have found themselves at odds with children of various ethnic backgrounds, particularly Indochinese and Latino.

Why? The causes are many, subtle and complex. And the Somalis' experience provides a window into exactly what rough-sledding the introduction to American society can be.

Among the children, things began with the calling of names, taunts, bullying. This goes back, the Somalis say, almost to 1991 when they began arriving in San Diego.

Thousands of miles away, their African homeland was consumed in violent clan warfare, wreaking anarchy and mass starvation, after the collapse of President Siad Barre's totalitarian regime. In December 1992, then-President Bush ordered 28,000 U.S. troops, including Marines from Camp Pendleton, into Somalia to escort convoys of food to starving refugees of the civil war.
Somalian refugees arrived in San Diego in significant numbers with little or no advance notice. This often happens with refugee groups who are literally airlifted out of countries in turmoil and deposited in the United States perhaps a mere 24 hours later.

Somalian students say that practically from the beginning, other students have made fun of their cultural dress, with remarks such as, "It’s not Halloween."

They are picked on, they say, and attacked when they pass through Colina del Sol park on their way to and from school.

"The policeman says if a fight happens, walk away," said one Somalian teen-ager. "But how can you walk away? If someone hits you, you are going to fight back."

Other students claim it's the Somalis who "have an attitude," who threaten to beat people up, who fight in groups instead of one-on-one, and who are quick to take off their belts and use the buckle ends for weapons.

'Little Mogadishu'

The Somalian refugees who have come to San Diego have settled, for the most part, in City Heights, an area that is often called a "little U.N." More than 35 different languages are spoken on its sidewalks.

Last spring, the official tally at Crawford High School, which draws much of its population from City Heights, was 29.7 percent Indochinese, 27.3 percent Hispanic, 26.3 percent black, 13.3 percent white, 1.5 percent Asian and 1.9 other. Included in the black population are about 260 Somalian students.

Precisely how many Somalis live in San Diego County is unknown. Estimates range from 2,000 to 8,000. Michael Sprague, president of the City Heights Town Council, places the number in City Heights at 4,500 to 5,000.

While "usually immigrant groups are scattered over a dozen or hundreds of blocks," Sprague said, "the Somalis in City Heights have formed a dense enclave along University Avenue, between 58th Street and Fairmount Avenue."

The section has acquired the nickname "Little Mogadishu," after the capital of Somalia.

In a school, Somalian children form a distinct group. Most are Muslim. Women and girls wear veils and scarves that cover their hair.

But differences go much deeper than appearance. In Somalia, few women work outside their homes or drive cars. Men generally do not take direction from women.

Islamic law forbids alcohol, drugs and premarital sex. Violations incur severe penalties.
Somalis do not touch members of the opposite sex who are not related to them.

They follow certain dietary restrictions -- no pork, for instance -- and pray several times a day.

Because they are relatively new to the United States and find the culture very different, said Omar Mohamed, president of the Somali and East African Youth Center, Somalian children tend to keep to themselves at school.

That has led other students to consider them standoffish, he said, and to take offense.

Somalian parents complain that students deliberately poke and touch Somalian girls to provoke reaction. Boys of other ethnic groups try to speak to them. "That's impossible culturally," Mohamed said.

Mohamoud Bile Jama, board chairman of the youth center, said that when his daughter was in elementary school a few years ago, several children trapped her and tried to tear off her veil so they could see her hair.

A mother, who asked that her name not be printed, said students make fun of the Somalis' diet and circulate wild untruths about what the African children consume. "They say, 'You've been eating roaches, and now you don't want to eat this?' " she said.

'Looking for peace'

The Somalis' number and proximity to one another has served to insulate them somewhat from pressures to assimilate. The same factors have also made their presence as a group more noticeable, even in the heart of the "little U.N." -- and particularly in schools.

The Somalis in City Heights are politically divided into eight to 10 rival clans of varying sizes. And, "They have brought their civil war with them," said Sprague -- not the violence but the division.

For school officials, police and other outside groups, these internal divisions magnify the communication difficulties presented by language and customs.

But Mohamed said Somalian parents of all clans were anguished and alarmed at the tensions their children were experiencing.

"Somalis come from a country ruined by civil war," he said. "They are looking for peace."

Although the public is not much accustomed to distinguishing between immigrant and refugee, how the Somalis got here may play a role in how they have been received.
Traditional immigrant groups often wait for years and save to pay their way to the United States. They see the federal government airlifting refugees here practically overnight, said Bob Montgomery, deputy director of the International Rescue Committee, a refugee resettlement agency.

"The immigrants think, 'Well, they're getting free housing, free cars, free loans,'" he said. "The kids hear the rumors." He added, "A lot of it's not true."

According to SDSU sociology professor Kenji Ima, traditional immigrants typically are so grateful to finally arrive in this country, they tend to bite their tongues and put up with what comes their way.

By contrast, said Montgomery, "the Somalis as a group kind of stood up to that and maybe made the friction a little greater than it was for other groups."

In 20 years of working with newcomers, he said, "I don't recall anything of the dimension (of what happened at Crawford)."

**Differing interpretations**

No school official agreed to speak on the record about the Somalian students' reputation for being quick to take a dispute beyond words.

But privately, staff members at schools inside and outside the Crawford cluster characterized their Somalian students as tending to be more aggressive than others.

Several advanced the theory that this was perhaps an understandable impact of war on young lives.

Somalian parents do not accept this interpretation. They say flatly that their children are only defending themselves.

"They feel that it's very unfair because the African-Americans and Latinos would do things behind the scene and the school would not notice until the Somalis reacted," said Abdi Mohamoud, executive director of the refugee agency Horn of Africa.

Francine Williams, director of San Diego Unified City Schools' Race and Human Relations Department, said she had seen no such aggressiveness among Somalian students.

And, in any case, she added, "I don't know that it's fair to make such a broad generalization."

The public's puzzlement at African-Americans fighting Africans, as this last round of conflict predominantly was, highlighted the Somalis' complicated circumstance in the American scheme of things.
The Somalis do not see themselves as natural allies of African-Americans. To the Somalis, what they have in common with African-Americans, said Mohamoud, is "skin color alone."

It is America, Mohamoud explained, that "tends to group people by races. But in the outside world, it really doesn't work that way. It's cultures."

In the 19th century, in much the same way, immigrants from Naples, Sicily and Florence were surprised to reach the United States and find themselves together under the umbrella "Italian," said Ima, the sociology professor.

Islah Abdul-Hafeez, an African-American and director of a private nonprofit Islamic academy, said Somalis are well aware of this country's often negative portrayal of inner-city African-Americans.

And, at the same time, African-American teen-agers picture Africa and Somalia as primitive.

"We've all been stereotyped," said Abdul-Hafeez.

A different minefield

Last year, Somalian parents carried their complaints and concerns to officials at Mann Middle School, a feeder to Crawford. And if the cruelty of children, a difference of clothing and varying customs were tricky ground to negotiate -- expectations proved a different minefield.

"Teachers were powerful in Somalia," explained Mohamed, of the Somalian youth center. Somalis recognize now that things are different in the United States. But "in the first few years here, the Somalis thought the teachers were like back home."

The Somalis expected the school to decree an end to the teasing and name-calling.

The school did not do as they expected. Meetings were convened, attended by members of the Somalian community, school staff, San Diego police, parents of other ethnic groups and various other interested parties.

Steps that were taken, Mohamed said, were "not deep enough." The Somalian parents came away greatly disappointed.

"In the United States," said Williams, of the city schools' race and human relations department, "we talk about people being part of the solution and helping to resolve the issue. A school can't solve every problem in the community."

The Somalis felt the schools had failed them.
The other lap that Somalian conflicts have fallen into is that of the San Diego police. In the days after the street fights, the Somalis were saying they had a good relationship, overall, with the police. But when it came to their children, the police also had failed them.

"The perception is the police are only doing things against the Somali kids," said Sgt. Gary Mitrovich, of the SDPD juvenile services team. "The kids are telling just one side of the story (to their parents)."

And that plays into a universal reaction that crosses cultural boundaries. "It's a 100 percent parent thing," he said. "You arrest a juvenile, the parents' reaction is, 'My kid wouldn't do that.'"

After the second stick-and-rock-throwing confrontation, the rumor spread like wildfire among the Somalis that the police had arrested only Somalian teen-agers.

Mitrovich and a team of officers spent the next day in the Somalian community, relaying the true arrest numbers: three Somalis, three African-Americans and one Latino.

Mitrovich's view of the brawls: "In any given situation where you have a fight, it's not generally one side's or one person's fault. Everyone has to accept some responsibility."

Some school officials are convinced "ringleaders" were the catalysts that took the conflict from words to street brawls in an attempt to establish themselves as a force.

Various groups from the Urban League to African students at City College have offered their services to Crawford and to the Somalian community since last month's disturbances.

The schools continue to work on cultural education, outreach and mediation.

But hardly anyone believes the troubles are over for good. They are only over, said Mitrovich, "until the next incident, which could be next week or could be next year."

Caption: 2 MAPS 1 GRAPH 1 PIC 1,2,3. Diverse neighborhood, The racial breakdown of Crawford High School's student body reflects the racial diversity of City Heights. There are an estimated 4,500 to 5,000 Somalis in the area. (A-18) 4. "In any given situation where you have a fight, it's not generally one side's or one person's fault. Everyone has to accept some responsibility." Sgt. Gary Mitrovich of the SDPD juvenile services team (A-18) 1,2,3. FRED GATES / Union-Tribune
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