Dahir Dudi’s eyes have seen better days.

For decades, he ran a successful livestock business in the southern Somalia port city of Kismaya. Good times were plentiful for Dudi and his 13 children -- many of whom worked in the family business.

Now, he is straining his eyes to see the words on a blackboard in a City Heights classroom. Written neatly on the blackboard is typical fast-food fare -- hamburgers, cheeseburgers, fish sandwiches -- and their corresponding prices.

Dudi struggles to master the products and pricing, as well as how to ask for them in English. And all of this at the age of 98.

"The hardest thing about coming here (to San Diego) has been starting over from ground zero," Dudi, who came to America in 1993, said through an interpreter. "The best part is peace."

The still vigorous Dudi is learning English as a personal challenge in a class with other Somali refugees who came to San Diego to escape a bloody civil war.

As many as 80 men and women attend the classes, which are held four nights a week in a portion of City Heights that is so highly populated by Somalis that it is called "Little Mogadishu" for the Somali capital.

The classes are conducted by the Horn of Africa, a 3-year-old nonprofit agency that provides free English language instruction, job placement, tutoring, citizenship preparation and other assistance.

Abdi Mohamoud, 25, is founder and executive director of the all-volunteer organization. He is a January graduate of San Diego State University with a degree in business administration. He, too, is an immigrant, having moved to San Diego in 1982 with two older brothers.

In the typical style of an entrepreneur, Mohamoud saw a yawning need and filled it.

Several years ago, he noticed that many established resettlement organizations were ineffective in serving East African refugees because they did not understand the language, religion or culture.

Most of the refugees he serves are from Somalia, Ethiopia and Djibouti. Many are
Islamic and speak Amharic, Swahili, Somali or other dialects. A native of East Africa, Mohamoud has a grasp of the languages and social rhythms of the people.

Also in tune is his volunteer board of directors and instructors, who find a constant flow of new students in a Somali population that has swelled to about 8,000.

To help meet the demand, Mohamoud is seeking donations from the public to help pay for rent, utilities and to hire permanent teachers.

Mohamoud has a stock message for newcomers.

"I tell them that in this country, there are two sides: the bad side and the good side. If you want to go to the bad side, you can do that and die. But there is so much opportunity for good here."

Inside the teeming classroom are men and women seated at long rows of desks. As is custom in East Africa, the men sit apart from the women; the men congregate at the front of the class, the women at the back.

Many of the men wear a fez, a brimless hat with a flat crown. Others have hair tinted flaming red from henna treatments, a stylish touch from the Horn of Africa.

The women are resplendent in large, brightly colored scarves of red, gold, green or purple that cover much of their head and upper torso. Their faces, peeking through the coverlet, are as smooth as marble.

Asha Muhumed, 58, is a mother with six children. She has been raising them alone since arriving in 1993. Her husband is stuck in a refugee camp in Kenya, and the strain of her crushing responsibilities is evident.

Her children range from 10 to 16 years of age and she admits having a difficult time controlling them. In her melodic voice Muhumed explains how her children have quickly picked up English in school, while she does not know enough of the language to answer the phone.

She wants to master English so that she can help her children with their schoolwork and take a more active role in their education.

"The least it will do is help me answer the phone if the school calls," she said of the English language class.

Abdi Dahir is still reeling from his step down in status from Somalia to San Diego.

The 66-year-old was a successful businessman in the import-export business. He had two villas, several cars and enough money to travel at will.
He and his family are now making ends meet with a government check. That barely leaves enough money for a pack of cigarettes, he said. He is "very hopeful" that the class will equip him with enough knowledge of English to establish an import-export business between San Diego and Somalia.

"The goal of many of the people in our classes is to get off of public assistance as soon as possible," said Ahmad Sahid, chairman of the board of Horn of Africa. "Many of them were successful businesspeople back home, but find their skills are useless here unless they learn English."

Many of the refugees are so eager to get a job and send money back to their families that they will move to the unaccustomed cold of the Midwest to labor in agriculture or to work in meat packing plants.

Horn of Africa is trying to prepare the refugees for work in the local market place. Graduates of its program have found work in the taxi and car rental businesses, doing jobs that pay more than minimum wage. And the organization is always on the lookout for new employment opportunities.

Students from "Little Mogadishu" are highly motivated.

"Everyone wants to be in a position to uplift themselves," Mohamoud said. "Once they see the opportunities that exist, they take advantage of them."

Caption: 3 PICS
1,2. In school: A student, above, goes over notes in a Horn of Africa English-as-a-second-language class. At right, teacher Abolullahi Hussen (left) checks student work.
3. Studying: Hamda Ahmed reads her notes in an English-as-a-second-language class in Horn of Africa's resettlement program. (B-3) 1,2,3. NELVIN CEPEDA / Union-Tribune photos

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