Uprooted Sudanese migrate east; S.D. housing costs force refugees out
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Sudanese refugees who fled to San Diego to escape the horrors of civil war are finding themselves cast adrift once more, this time as victims of a tight housing market.

Although there are no official statistics, members of the city's Sudanese community estimate that their ranks have plunged since 1998 from more than 10,000 to fewer than 4,000.

The exodus has led some to relocate in Utah, Minnesota, Tennessee or Nebraska -- cold-weather destinations that fit their pocketbook if not their taste in climate.

Their plight reflects the overall scarcity of vacant apartments in the San Diego region's tight rental market, where the vacancy rate is about 1 percent. But there is a twist.

Many of the Sudanese live in the Mid-City area in large families with low wages. During the economically sluggish mid-1990s when vacancies were plentiful, they were allowed to rent two-bedroom apartments at a modest price.

Now, with an improved economy, landlords are raising rents beyond their reach or evicting them. The justification: The Sudanese have more occupants in the apartments than the city code allows.

John Wright, a minister of the Church of the Nazarene in City Heights, said the Sudanese are typical of the city's working poor, who are finding a narrowing of housing opportunities.

"The Sudanese are like the canary in a mine," Wright said. "They are an early warning device for the entire community."

Scott Blech, executive director of the San Diego County Apartment Association, said he is not surprised that the Sudanese, or anyone else, are caught in a housing crunch.

Blech said landlords struggled for much of the decade in a depressed economy. Now, they are recouping their losses by raising rents.

"When landlords had more vacancies, they were more flexible with the guidelines," Blech said.

The standard occupancy formula throughout the county is two adults for every bedroom. However, the region's housing market has few apartments of more than three
bedrooms. Large families must usually rent houses, which are few in number and expensive.

In a sense, the Sudanese are suffering culture shock. They traditionally have large families because they do not practice birth control. In Africa, extended families help shoulder the financial and child-rearing burden.

In San Diego, the refugees largely live in isolation. They find that a large family is hard to provide for in the minimum-wage jobs they fill. And finding suitable, affordable housing is proving nearly impossible.

Peter Tut struggled for several weeks, then gave up.

For three years, Tut lived in a $550-a-month, two-bedroom apartment with his wife and six children. In early November he was notified that his apartment complex was being remodeled and that he would have to vacate. When renovation is over, Tut was told he and his family could move back, but the new rent would be $700.

Tut could not afford the rent hike on his minimum-wage pay, which was supplemented by welfare assistance. So he searched in vain for weeks for an affordable apartment. In early December, he moved his family to Nashville, Tenn., where a friend told him that rents were cheap and large rentals plentiful.

"We tried to find a place for more than 30 days," Tut said, as he lugged mattresses and other furniture into a moving truck. "We're refugees. We don't know the people who can help us."

Sudanese refugee John Kang has contacts, but is still striking out on his apartment hunt. Kang is a caseworker in a community-based social service agency in City Heights and faces eviction from the two-bedroom apartment he lives in with his wife and eight children, who range in age from 2 months to 17 years.

Kang’s landlord has given him until Jan. 31 to move. Kang said he is not angry with the landlord; he knows the apartment is too small.

"Sometimes, we don't get oxygen," said Kang, who has lived in the City Heights apartment for five years. "When the weather is hot, we have to open all of the windows so we can breathe."

Kang is frustrated because he applied for public housing in 1995 at the San Diego Housing Commission, but remains among 21,000 people on a waiting list.

"I am in a hard condition," Kang said.

Peter Duku, a student at Mesa College, said he is on the verge of dropping out before his final exams this semester because he, too, faces eviction. Duku is studying to
become a physician's assistant, but cannot concentrate on school until he finds a place to live for himself, his wife and three children.

Back in Sudan, which is usually hot and dry, Duku said he and his Sudanese brothers would build their own houses. But that solution does not readily translate to San Diego.

"If the government allowed us to build huts, we would have them all over this area," said Duku, gesturing toward the City Heights community.

Duku said he would like to raise money so the Sudanese could buy an apartment complex of their own.

"We need to start helping ourselves," Duku said. "We have to create our own village and be our own landlord."

Largely because of the protracted civil war, the United States operates a refugee program for the Sudanese. To qualify for the program, a relative applies to a refugee assistance agency -- such as the International Rescue Committee or Catholic Charities in San Diego -- to have a family member considered for resettlement. The prospective refugee can apply for himself or herself, as well.

After a review, the Immigration and Nationalization Service decides whether the applicant is eligible.

Many of the Sudanese in San Diego are either American citizens or in the process of becoming citizens and have found advocates to aid them at City Hall and elsewhere.

Wright, a professor of theology at Point Loma Nazarene University, recently arranged a meeting between some of the Sudanese and a representative of Mayor Susan Golding's office, to which the refugees appealed for help.

A second meeting included a representative of the Housing Commission, who assisted a handful of refugees in signing up for housing assistance programs.

"I saw that there was a hole in their support system," said Daniel Morales, a community liaison worker for the housing commission. "They did not understand how the system works."

The refugees escaped an African country in which predominately Muslim northerners have fought against mostly Christian southerners since the mid-1950s. Estimates are that more than 2 million people have been killed, and the fighting continues.

Most of San Diego's Sudanese community survived months or years in teeming refugee camps in northeast Africa before relief agencies arranged their transport to America.

San Diego's climate is similar to Sudan's. Many of the remaining refugees say they want
to stay.

Joseph Moseray, director of community building at the Alliance for African Assistance, said the problem needs to be addressed by city officials.

"I think it's a problem not only with the Sudanese, but all African refugees with large families," Moseray said. "There are no large apartments in the City Heights area, and large apartments outside of City Heights cost $1,000 or more a month. They can't afford it. They're being forced out, and something needs to be done."

Jeff Suchland is office manager of the La Maestra health care and training program in City Heights, where Kang is employed. He said his office has been inundated in recent weeks with Sudanese refugees in distress about housing. He said they are having the most trouble with housing because of their family size.

Having worked with the Sudanese refugee community for several years, Suchland said they are ideal tenants, hard-working and honest.

"What we need are caring landlords who want to rent to decent people, family people," Suchland said.

Caption: 2 PICS
1. Headin' out: Kenya Mayal, 6, shook hands with the drawing of a cowboy on the U-Haul van that was being loaded by his Sudanese refugee family as they prepared to move from San Diego to Nashville, Tenn. Like many Sudanese, Kenya's family needed to move to a state with affordable and more plentiful housing. 2. Moving day: Boi Lual (front) and Johnson Choi carried a mattress as they helped Peter Tut and his family pack up for the move from San Diego to Tennessee. Behind the two men, Nyawargak Mayal lugged a box. (B-2) 1,2. JAMES BAIRD / Union-Tribune

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