

## A refugee in America: Hope vs. reality

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Monday, October 10, 2011 at 3:47 p.m.

Hadish Khassay sat on a yellow couch in his aunt's Santa Rosa apartment on Northcoast Street with a blue, glass cross around his neck. Things are not as he'd hoped they would be.

In July 2010, Khassay's US Airways flight landed in Oakland, a night, a day and a dream away from the Shimelba refugee camp in barren northern Ethiopia.

He fled his homeland, Eritrea, when he was 15. His country was warring with its neighbor, Ethiopia, and was going to force him to take up a gun. So, on foot and risking execution by Eritrean soldiers, he escaped.

In Ethiopia he farmed goats for \$17 a month for eight years, defying a government ban on refugees working. He married, but his wife, Lemet, and son, Robel, now aged 4, lived a day's drive away.

So, again, Khassay left for another country. He became one of Santa Rosa's 160,000 residents, and one of 11 Eritrean refugees that the nonprofit social services agency Catholic Charities has resettled in Sonoma County since 2008.

He planned a new life, expecting he would bring his family to join him.

Now 24, he's come to like America. "Freedom," he said, a pebble of English in a stream of his native Tigrinya.

But today he is struggling. And the two-time refugee wants to return to life as a refugee in Africa.

It's hard here, he said. He can't find work, mostly because he doesn't speak English, though he is trying to learn.

Khassay had a friend with him for an interview, an Eritrean who has been in America since 1990 and speaks English well. His name is Medhin; he didn't want his last name used.

"He thought everything was going to be OK. He would find a job and take care of his family, but it's not working out," Medhin said.

"He can't go back to Eritrea, he doesn't want to go into the army," Medhin said. "He wants to go to Ethiopia. But if he had a job, he would stay."

Khassay juggled a key chain that had an image of Joseph on one side and of Mary on the other. He smiled, but he held his head in one hand, too.

He said he owns nothing but the clothes Catholic Charities gave him when he arrived here.

"He has his cross," Medhin said. Khassay touched it with slender fingers.



JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat  
Eritrean-born Hadish Khassay, 24, arrived in America over a year ago but can't find work and is staying with various extended family members. He hasn't talked to his wife in Ethiopia in eight months and may attempt to return to Africa.



Catholic Charities helped him get the government benefits that now have expired, leaving him broke. The agency has enrolled him in a job search and training program. It also helped him apply for a residency permit and a driver's license, which he just obtained.

Sometimes he drives his sister's old Toyota, though he can't afford the gas. That, plus the fact that he doesn't have money for buses, makes it tough to get to the English classes he signed up to take.

Still, he goes as often as he can and when he submits resumes, he lists those classes, and volunteer work he does at Goodwill Industries, as experience.

"They haven't called back," Mehdin said.

Khassay brought his visitor Ethiopian tea. It was hot and sweet, served in short, cut-crystal glasses. He said he hasn't talked to Lemet for eight months. He doesn't know where she lives now.

He sleeps in four houses around town, sharing time with family, relatives and friends because it's too crowded in any one place for too long.

The bicycle that he once rode around town was stolen.

He knows the name, "Elsie Allen," that belongs to the high school near where his English as a Second Language class is held. If he improves, they will send him on to Santa Rosa Junior College for more advanced studies.

"He's doing okay, before he used to say nothing," said Mehdin.

He looks like many other young American men with loose jeans, a white, "Atlanta, Georgia" t-shirt, and white tennis shoes.

"He doesn't feel American, not yet," said Mehdin.