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SOMALI BANTU FIND STRANGE NEW LIFE IN URBAN U.S. By Rollo Romig

NEW YORK - After 13 years of frustrating delays and worsening conditions in a Kenyan refugee camp, 13,000 Somali Bantu have finally been allowed to seek asylum in the United States. But their quest for a home has only just begun.

In her new documentary "Rain in a Dry Land", Anne Makepeace follows the fortunes of two Somali Bantu families as they try and adapt to life in Springfield, Massachusetts and Atlanta, Georgia. The Bantu were the most vulnerable victims of the civil war that broke out in Somalia in 1991. Descended from slaves kidnapped in southern Africa two centuries ago by Arab traders, the Bantu in Somalia had near-pariah status, and were denied education and the right to own land. "We were treated like beasts of burden," says Aden, the father of the Bantu family that settles in Springfield in the film. "Rain in a Dry Land" follows the Bantu in a Kenyan refugee camp, eagerly absorbing "cultural orientation" classes sponsored by the U.S. State Department. Their teacher introduces them to a world of high-rise buildings, stovetop cooking, transatlantic flights and 100-dollar bills. The men are surprised to learn that "in America, all forced sex is rape", even in marriage. Despite never having learned to read and write in Somali or Swahili, the refugees throw themselves into learning English, and sing songs about the United States. "If it is written, we will go. If not, we'll be stuck here eating yellow gruel," laughs one refugee. Somalia has had no functioning national government for the last 15 years. It has been described as a "capitalist anarchy" -- commerce carries on, but clan warlords run riot over the country. In June, an Islamist militia called the Union of Islamic Courts seized control of the capital, Mogadishu, abruptly taming its wild streets with strict Sharia law. Calls for jihad have sparked fears in neighbouring Ethiopia and Eritrea that war could engulf the entire region. Throughout this era of crisis, the Bantu refugees did not want to return to Somalia -- and Somalia didn't want them, nor did their ancestral home countries, Tanzania and Mozambique. Kenya has insisted that it cannot indefinitely maintain such a large refugee population, which has only swelled in recent months. The United States worked out a plan to distribute 13,000 Bantu among a number of cities where the cost of living is low and jobs are readily available. But not all here were happy with the scheme. Sam Brownback, a Kansas senator who had welcomed waves of

Sudanese and Yugoslav refugees in years past, balked at taking in so many Bantu, saying that they "would not work well in Kansas". Threats from racist skinheads and other protests scuttled plans to settle Bantu families in two other towns. The refugees were delayed again by a backlog of new security screenings after the Sep. 11, 2001 attacks, and concerns over the Bantu practice of female circumcision. Meanwhile, in the Kenyan refugee camps, theft and rape became commonplace, and the infant mortality rate rose. "Rain in a Dry Land" joins the Bantu in 2004, as they finally begin arriving in the United States. In Springfield, Aden, his wife Madina, and their seven children use a trashcan for the first time, and joke about seeing their breath in the cold air. In Atlanta, Arbai and her four children learn to walk down stairs, holding tight to the handrail like they have vertigo. "Last night was the first night we slept in beds," says Arbai, eating French toast on her first morning in the U.S. "That's why the sun came up before we woke up." >From this point, the Bantu have six months to get jobs and support themselves before their government assistance stops. The children are thrust into public school, still barely speaking English. Aden, proud and intense, soon becomes frustrated with his inability to keep up with the rent and bills. Like many Bantu, Aden has only known work as a subsistence farmer. He loses his temper when he can't figure out the childproof cap on a bottle of medicine. Madina, alienated and depressed, sits on the couch all day, leaving the mothering to Aden. "All night long my mind is wandering back to that time," she says. "How can I ever forget seeing my own mother murdered? It will haunt me to the death." Welfare rules require Madina to get a job after her youngest child turns two. Unwilling to put her children in daycare, Madina argues with Aden about whether they should start stealing to get by. Instead, she becomes pregnant with her eighth child so that the assistance money will continue. In Atlanta, Arbai trains to work as a janitor. She has trouble with her unwieldy floor-scrubber, but her sunny disposition is irrepressible. Sahara, her 13-year-old daughter, seizes on the notion of U.S. "freedom" as an excuse for acting out. She soon lands in regular disciplinary trouble at school. "We have to adapt to American culture," Sahara says. "I don't need my culture here." But 18 months after moving, both families show signs of settling in. In Springfield, Aden gets work as a landscaper and carpenter. The family's rent goes down to 165 dollars a month from 750 dollars when they land a public housing apartment. They are still eating the yellow gruel they lived on in the refugee camp, but Madina starts smiling again. Back in Atlanta, Sahara impresses her teachers by improving in school. Her older sister Khadija marries Abdirahman, a young Bantu man who woos her with a traditional courtship. Best of all, Arbai learns that two daughters she thought had been killed 14 years ago in the war are alive in Somalia; suddenly she's a

grandmother. The film is shot in cinema verité style, without voiceover or talking head interviews. Rather than treating refugees as an abstract policy issue, "Rain in a Dry Land" paints an intimate portrait of the lives of the "American Bantu", revealing their beauty and resilience without condescension, and illustrating the special care new refugees need with clarity and compassion. "Rain in a Dry Land", shown this month at the Margaret Mead film festival at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, is screening at various film festivals internationally. In 2007, it will premiere on the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service's show "P.O.V.", and on CBC News World in Canada.