

## **Somalis seeking asylum take back-door route to U.S.; Suspension of refugee program has put them on Latin American path**

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### **Body**

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The **asylum** seeker from Somalia hung his head as an immigration judge grilled him about his treacherous journey from the Horn of Africa. By air, sea and land he finally made it to Mexico, and then a taxi delivered him into the arms of **U.S.** border agents at San Diego.

Islamic militants had killed his brother, Mohamed Ahmed Kheire testified, and majority clan members had beaten his sister. He had to flee Mogadishu to live.

The voice of the judge, beamed by videoconference from Seattle, crackled loudly over a speaker in the mostly empty courtroom near the detention yard in the desert north of Los Angeles. He wanted to know why Kheire had no family testimony to corroborate his **asylum** claim.

Kheire, 31, said he didn't have access to e-mail in detention and didn't think to ask while writing to family on his perilous trek.

It seemed like the end of Kheire's dream as he waited for the judge's ruling. He clasped his hands, his plastic jail bracelet dangling from his wrist, and looked up at the ceiling, murmuring words of prayer.

Kheire is one of hundreds of **Somalis** in the past two years to have staked everything on a wild **asylum** gamble by following immigration **routes** to the **United States** traditionally traveled by Latinos.

With the **suspension** of a **U.S. refugee program** and stepped-up security in the Gulf of Aden and along Mediterranean smuggling **routes**, more overseas migrants from Somalia are pursuing **asylum** through what one expert calls the "**back door**."

"The **U.S.** has closed most of the **doors** for **Somalis** to come in through the **refugee program**, so they've found alternative ways to get in," said Mark Hetfield, senior vice president for policy and **programs** at the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. "This is their new **route**." About 1,500 people from around the world showed up in **U.S.**

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airports and on the borders seeking asylum during the 2009 fiscal year, according to statistics from U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

Somalis were the biggest group to make the journey, with most arriving in San Diego. More than 240 Somalis arrived during that period -- more than twice as many as the year before.

Most Somalis have reached the United States -- there are about 87,000 here -- through U.S.-sponsored refugee-resettlement programs. But the State Department suspended a family-reunification program for refugees in 2008 over fraud concerns. The number of Somalis admitted by refugee programs dwindled to about 4,000 last year.

Those now traveling through Latin America are taking a path well worn by asylum seekers from other countries. Immigration lawyers say they have worked with clients from Ethiopia and Iraq who also reached the United States through Mexico.

"To get a flight from Africa to Europe is very hard. The easiest place to go is America," said Yahya Idardon, an asylum seeker who fled Somalia last year after his father and brother were killed. "Africa to Latin America is easy. . . . When you are going to Latin America, no one is concerned about you, no one is asking, so it is easy to go there and cross all these countries." Once reaching the U.S. border in San Diego, Somalis are frisked, fingerprinted and screened by an asylum officer to gauge whether they have a credible fear of returning home.

They are then shuttled to an immigration detention center until their cases go to court.

About 80 Somalis are being held in Lancaster, a detention center 50 miles north of Los Angeles. Dozens more have been held in San Diego and the remote border town of El Centro, immigration lawyers said.

On Jan. 4, the government plans to start releasing many asylum seekers while they wait for their immigration cases to be heard. It is unclear how many Somalis will be let out; they must prove their identity and many don't have documents. And still others say they have nowhere to go even if they were freed, their attorneys said.

Compared with asylum seekers from other countries, Somalis have been more likely to win their cases, according to immigration court statistics.

But in the courtroom in Lancaster, Kheire spent the last moments of his hearing worried that the judge would send him back to Mogadishu to face the threat of death -- even after he had survived such a harrowing journey.

The attorneys for Kheire and the government sat quietly in the courtroom, listening to the judge read the ruling as Kheire prayed.

A Somali interpreter whispered urgently into Kheire's ear. He broke into a hesitant smile. He would be allowed to stay.

Kheire left the courtroom in his black, laceless sneakers and jail jumpsuit, escorted by sheriff's officials. Later that night, he was dropped off by authorities at a nearby train station. He had \$5 in his pocket.

"They said, 'This is America. Welcome to the United States of America,' " Kheire said.

-- Associated Press

## Graphic

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IMAGE; Damian Dovarganes/associated Press; Mohamed Ahmed Kheire, right, consults with Esperanza Immigrant Rights Project detention lawyer James Lyall in Los Angeles.

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