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Former Ethiopian Cadets Stranded in Kyrgyzstan

By Peter Leonard

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Tesgaye with his wife, second right; Dyde, second left; and Wondumagnehu watching Ethiopian music videos. **Dalton Bennett**

TOKMOK, Kyrgyzstan — Softly singing along to the wistful strains of Ethiopian music, Haymanot Tesgaye and his friends are transported back to their homeland in Africa, far from this Central Asian nation where they have been stranded for two decades.

Over that time, the men have withstood horrific racial abuse and struggled to piece together a living — a testament to the ways in which lives are irrevocably changed when empires and regimes crumble.

Tesgaye, once an aspiring fighter pilot, was one of 80 Ethiopian cadets sent to a Soviet military training facility in the remote republic of Kyrgyzstan in 1989 to master the art of flying combat aircraft.

“At that time in Ethiopia there was a military government, and because of an agreement between the Soviet Union and Ethiopia, they used to train pilots for the country’s air force,” Tesgaye explained.

Within two years, both the Soviet Union and Ethiopia’s Marxist regime had collapsed, forcing the cadets to think carefully about their options for their future in a strange and foreign land.

Almost 20 years later, still fearing reprisals back home for the small role he played in the brutal rule of deposed Marxist leader Mengistu Haile Mariam, Tesgaye is marooned here — a world away from a family that has grown older without him.

Some of the Ethiopians found ways to leave in the early days, emigrating or seeking asylum, while others risked returning home. A few who stayed behind were murdered.

Only nine of them now remain in Kyrgyzstan, and they form a tightknit group, meeting often to eat familiar food, sing old songs and reminisce.

Listening to silky, free-flowing Ethiopian jazz, Tesgaye fights back the tears, overcome with yearning for a real home.

“When I hear this, I lose myself. I am in the air without a compass and I don’t where I am going,” Tesgaye said.

“Especially now for us. … I don’t have the words to explain this. It’s from here,” he said, pointing to his heart.

Some of the Ethiopians eke out a living as taxi drivers in Tokmok, the small town that once housed the military base.

A model of an Il-28 bomber still stands on a pedestal by the side of the main road to remind motorists passing through this sleepy and dusty spot of its aviation past. But the former training area, just a short walk from Tesgaye’s cramped Soviet-era apartment, is now a desolate waste ground overrun by weeds and trash.

Kyrgyzstan is a rich blend of ethnic groups, including Uzbeks, Russians, Koreans, Germans and Meskhetian Turks. But ethnic relations are often problematic, as best shown by devastating ethnic clashes between Kyrgyz and minority ethnic Uzbeks earlier this year that claimed hundreds of lives, mainly among Uzbeks, and forced hundreds of thousands to flee their homes.

While tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks are a symptom of historical grievances over land and power, the kind of widespread intolerance that the Ethiopians and many other African men have had to endure in Kyrgyzstan stems from incomprehension and ignorance.

Upon first arriving in Tokmok, when Tesgaye and his companions ventured outside the confines of the garrison, the prevailing reaction was bewilderment.

“At that time, people in the Soviet Union, in Kyrgyzstan, thought that we were rich … and if they met us outside the garrison they wanted to get something from us,” Tesgaye said.

Curiosity soon turned into something harder, however, and when they lost the protection of their military hosts, attacks and abuse became commonplace.

Tales of abysmal intimidation and violence are told with disarming lightness, as though they have become so common that their gravity no longer registers.

Another former cadet, Nassir Dyde, tells of a fellow countryman called Haptam who was savagely beaten to death by the relatives of a girlfriend with whom he had broken up.

"When the police found him they couldn't bring themselves to touch his body, because of his skin, so they summoned us to take him to the morgue," Dyde said. "They didn't even want to wash his body down, so we did it ourselves."

Dyde then showed the multiple scars across his own body where he has been stabbed or beaten.

Tens of thousands of Africans also went to Russia during Soviet times, most to study at universities. Thousands have stayed, including some more recent arrivals.

Most stay because they fear for their safety in their home country — for instance, if there is a war — while others stay for economic reasons, said Valence Maniragena, a native of Rwanda who heads a nongovernmental organization called Ichumbi, which helps Africans in St. Petersburg.

Africans face discrimination and abuse in Russia, and some have been killed in racist attacks, but Maniragena said the situation has improved somewhat in recent years.

In Uzbekistan, a populous country west of Kyrgyzstan, thousands of Afghans are experiencing a similar predicament, living in a state of limbo since the fall of the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan in 1992.

While yearning to go abroad, the former Ethiopian cadets have largely resigned themselves to their fate and some, like Tesgaye, have married local women and had children.

"When we walked down the street, people driving past used to roll down their windows to stare or spit at us, but we walked proudly with our child," said Dilnara Tesgaye, after serving out platefuls of a tangy Ethiopian lentil dish that she learned how to make from her husband.

The cruel irony in the Ethiopians' plight is that hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz people forced to travel to Russia in search of work themselves face frequent verbal and physical abuse at the hands of racists.

Sisay Wondumagnehu, another Ethiopian who came to Tokmok to train to fly the Soviet-made Mi-8 helicopter, said they have repeatedly tried to seek asylum, but have failed every time.

"I would like to go another country, but I have no way out, and so here I am."