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Muslim Refugee and His Family Find a Haven in Harlem

Drissa Cisse, right, tied a bracelet onto the wrist of his daughter Nabitou, 11, while her sister, Fatoumata, 8, watched. His wife, Aminata Sylla, spoke with their son Yahya, 1. Credit Hilary Swift for The New York Times

By ELEANOR STANFORD

The second time men went to Drissa Cisse's home to look for him, he knew it was time to run.

It was late 2009 in Ivory Coast. For nearly a decade, opposition to the president, Laurent Gbagbo, had been repressed by death squads, men who traveled the country kidnapping and killing civilians. They targeted perceived political dissidents, but also Muslims and members of the Dioula ethnic group.

Mr. Cisse, 40, was affiliated with Rally of the Republicans, the liberal opposition party, and was a Dioula and a practicing Muslim. The gas station he owned was vandalized twice, and two of his cars were set on fire, he said.

The second time two men went to the family home in the capital city, Yamoussoukro, Mr. Cisse was away at work. His wife, Aminata Sylla, was just getting out of the shower. The men searched the house and left.

"It was a really close-run thing," Ms. Sylla, 43, said.

She called her husband, who headed straight to the airport and got on a plane to New York City. Soon after, she fled with their three children to Bonikro, a village on the Bandama River. They hid in a friend's house for eight months, she said.

In Ivory Coast, Mr. Cisse had employed 200 people, he said. In addition to a Shell gas station, he owned a coffee delivery business.

“I like to help people, I always have,” said Mr. Cisse, describing how he would lend his six trucks to anyone in the community who needed them. In 2000, the governor of Yamoussoukro presented him with an award for service to the community.

In New York, Mr. Cisse moved into the two-bedroom apartment of a fellow Ivorian political asylum seeker, where up to 15 people at a time were living. Mr. Cisse did not speak English.

“I wasn’t prepared,” he said, speaking in French. “How could I have been prepared?”

He was granted political asylum in January 2010. There were days he would not eat in order to save money for plane tickets for his family to join him, he said.

In October 2012, the family reunited in New York. The children — Fatoumata, then 5; Nabitou, then 8; and their brother, Famourlaye, then 10 — had not seen their father in two years.

Mr. Cisse and his son Famourlaye, 13, in prayers at home in Harlem. Credit Hilary Swift for The New York Times

The Cisse family moved into an apartment in Harlem on West 150th Street, near Jackie Robinson Park. Another son, Yahya, was born in February 2014.

In 2011, Mr. Cisse contacted the Refugee Resettlement Department of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New York, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. Thanks to the job training Catholic Charities helped the couple receive, Mr. Cisse now has two part-time kitchen jobs, and Ms. Sylla started work in August as a home health aide. Having escaped the political violence in Ivory Coast, the couple now struggle with poverty in New York.

Monthly bills come to around \$2,000, including \$1,135 for the apartment. Each day that Ms. Sylla works costs them \$15 in child care.

In August, Catholic Charities used \$470 from the Neediest Cases fund to buy the family a kitchen table and chairs, a computer desk and a futon.

Mr. Cisse’s mother is still in Ivory Coast, and he tries to send her \$50 at the end of each month. During the summer, however, that was not possible.

Aminata Sylla with her son Yahya, 1. Credit Hilary Swift for The New York Times

“We work hard; we work really hard to survive,” Ms. Sylla said, “but we have restarted life at zero. If we were two, it would move faster, but we give everything we can to the kids.”

The children are thriving in New York. The three eldest were all at the top of their classes at their schools last year. Their framed certificates hang on a wall of the apartment, next to heart-shape artwork made in school.

Having to buy a new pair of shoes for one of the children can derail their careful financial planning. The bills do not always get paid.

Mr. Cisse has a steady gaze and slumped shoulders. His English is improving. In an ideal world, he would like to use his retail experience to sell African clothes in New York. These days, he tries not to think about the comfortable life he left behind, but his family’s experiences haunt him.

“It’s exhausting,” he said. “I try to focus and stay calm for the children. I go into my room, lock the door and lie down. Or I go to the park and walk around.”

The couple believe it was divine intervention that kept Mr. Cisse away from home those two days in Ivory Coast when the men came searching for him. Their faith has not been shaken.

“Thank God we are in good health,” Ms. Sylla said. “That is the most important thing, and life will get better.”

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