

Network here helps refugees get asylum

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Ali has spent the last few years fleeing from the brutality of civil war and ethnic strife in the Democratic Republic of Congo and neighboring Rwanda.

He raises his sleeve to show small, ugly scar on his left arm. The result, he says, of a knife wound he received in a fight with a militiaman who tried to kill him. The psychological scars, he said, cut even deeper. He has nightmares, experiences trouble eating and sometimes fights off bouts of depression.

"If I'm sent back, I'm afraid I will be imprisoned like I was before or beaten," said Ali, a 32-year-old student at Auburn University in Alabama.

Ali, who didn't want his full name used because he fears reprisals against a sister still in the DRC, is seeking asylum in the United States. And he is getting help from a special program housed at Emory University.

The Atlanta Asylum Network was formed in 2003 by the school's Institute of Human Rights in collaboration with the Cambridge, Mass.-based Physicians for Human Rights, a nonprofit health and human rights organization.

The network, housed in a non-descript building on the Emory campus, enlists a team of volunteer physicians, psychologists and students to help evaluate and document claims of physical and psychological torture. Volunteers undergo training on how to spot the signs of torture, said Dabney Evans, a cofounder, said in an earlier interview.

Nerve damage, for instance, can be a sign that a person was tied and suspended by his arms or legs. Cigarette burns can leave distinctive scars. Surgical scars can be consistent with forced sterilization.

Then there are the invisible scars — the sleepless nights, depression, anger, distrust of authority.

Clients are referred by attorneys, social service agencies or through word of mouth. Clients come from more than a dozen nations that have been torn apart by conflict or political unrest, including Nigeria, Guatemala, Colombia, Rwanda, El Salvador, Haiti and Russia.

Dr. Jeremy Hess, director of the network and a co-founder, said the project has worked with clients across the Southeast. Its work is especially important in Atlanta, which sees a big share of asylum cases.

"We are careful not to take sides in this," Hess said. The network's role is clear: to determine whether physical or emotional scars are consistent with claims of torture or mistreatment.

Ali's case has yet to be heard, although most of his immediate family has already been granted asylum, said his attorney, Rachel Efron, an Atlanta immigration lawyer with the firm of Kuck Casablanca LLC.

Ali said his family was targeted because of his father's political beliefs and because some relatives were members of the Tutsi ethnic group. Ali, who moved to the United States earlier this year, said he was singled out as the eldest son.

Ali said without the network, he probably would find it difficult to afford hiring private physicians or psychologists to help his case. In addition, opening up to network volunteers helped build his confidence for asylum interview. He can now talk about his experience "without shame."

Each year, tens of thousands of people flee their home countries to come to the United States, where they hope to gain asylum from past persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution if they return, based on such factors as religious affiliation, nationality or political opinion.

In fiscal year 2005, 25,257 people were granted asylum in the United States, according to the Bureau of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

But there also have been a number of cases in which people sought asylum by fraudulently claiming they were victimized, which is why the network's work is so important.

"You have to do everything we can to bolster your clients credibility with the court and to show they're telling the truth," said Effron, his attorney. Between 20 and 30 percent of her clients are asylum cases. "It's hard to prove because very few people have tangible proof of what happened to them."

The program not only helps asylum seekers but often gives staffers and volunteers another perspective on life.

"It makes you really appreciate — on a lot of levels — the freedoms we have we have (in the United States)," said the network's Hess. "We have the freedom of association, the freedom of political activity. It's kind of amazing how little it takes in some parts of the world for people to be severely repressed and what torture does to people."