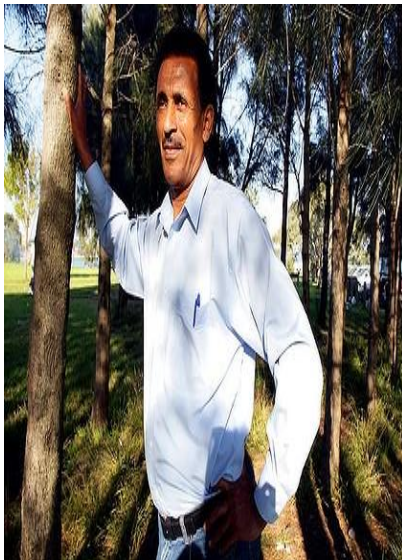


Africans having to fight against 'history of failure on blackness'

Written by Shane Green Friday, 29 April 2011

AUSTRALIA'S inability to accept "blackness" is working against the settlement of African refugees, according to an eminent community leader.

Dr Berhan Ahmed, head of the African Think Tank and the 2009 Victorian Australian of the Year, also said Australia's humanitarian assistance was "stopping at the airport", and failed to provide African migrants with the skills to find jobs and engage in society.



A frustrated Berhan Ahmed is tired of endless meetings and wants action to help African immigrants find their place

Dr Ahmed was speaking out after two brawls involving the Sudanese community, both of which followed a beauty pageant and ended in violent attacks on police.

He condemned the violence as "appalling and shameful", but said it was important to analyse the problems that led to the incidents.

Africans experienced racism daily, said Dr Ahmed, a refugee from Eritrea who arrived in Australia in 1987. "Australia has a black history with black people, and Africans coming with a black skin, they are just copping that sort of Aboriginal black treatment.

"We should have been ambassadors of change and acceptance for blackness. The system still has a problem accepting that blackness."

Australia has a history of failure on blackness, he argued, "and that's what's halting Africans in their settlement".

Dr Ahmed said African refugees were encountering racism when trying to find work. "People are changing their names to apply for a job. They are putting a different name to be called for an interview. And when they see their face, they tell them, 'Oh sorry, we'll call you again'."

The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission last year reported that young African Australians were suffering entrenched racial discrimination. After consultations in

Dandenong, Commissioner Helen Szoke said "systemic barriers" restricted job prospects for young African Australians, who also said they felt targeted by police.

Anecdotal reports suggested that some employers tried to avoid hiring refugees by framing job descriptions that effectively excluded them.

Dr Ahmed, who last month gave evidence to the Federal Parliamentary inquiry into multiculturalism, said another problem for migrants was boredom and lack of engagement. This resulted from a lack of adequate training and education to equip Africans for jobs.

He argued that refugee policies had not changed in line with the shift in Australia from a manufacturing to a knowledge and service economy. Previous migrant intakes were absorbed into factories, and it was not unusual to hear of people who had not learned English throughout their working lives.

"Now our economy is a knowledge and service economy," he said. "On the first day you have to be able to speak and write [English]. You have to have the qualifications and skills to fit into the system."

Dr Ahmed expressed a growing frustration with the inability of politicians to address this issue. "It's all been meeting and meeting and meeting. For the last four or five years, we've been meeting."

Refugees were getting up to six months' training, then returning to unemployment, he said. "Families are not getting anywhere. Their kids are also feeling that frustration."

The issue is not new. In 2007, the then immigration minister Kevin Andrews created a storm when he admitted the Howard government had squeezed the African component of the refugee program because "some groups don't seem to be settling and adjusting into the Australian way of life"