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Barrett Stinson/The Grand Island Independent, via Associated Press

A compromise on accommodation for Muslim workers during the holy month of Ramadan prompted protests last month at a meatpacking plant in Nebraska.

A Somali Influx Unsettles Latino Meatpackers

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GRAND ISLAND, Neb. — Like many workers at the meatpacking plant here, Raul A. Garcia, a Mexican-American, has watched with some discomfort as hundreds of Somali immigrants have moved to town in the past couple of years, many of them to fill jobs once held by Latino workers taken away in [immigration](#) raids.

Mr. Garcia has been particularly troubled by the Somalis' demand that they be allowed special breaks for prayers that are obligatory for devout Muslims. The breaks, he said, would inconvenience everyone else.

"The Latino is very humble," said Mr. Garcia, 73, who has worked at the plant, owned by JBS U.S.A. Inc., since 1994. "But they are arrogant," he said of the Somali workers. "They act like the United States owes them."

Mr. Garcia was among more than 1,000 Latino and other workers who protested a decision last month by the plant's management to cut their work day — and their pay — by 15 minutes to give scores of Somali workers time for evening prayers.

After several days of strikes and disruptions, the plant's management abandoned the plan.

But the dispute peeled back a layer of civility in this southern Nebraska city of 47,000, revealing slow-burning racial and ethnic tensions that have been an unexpected aftermath of the enforcement raids at workplaces by federal immigration authorities.

Grand Island is among a half dozen or so cities where discord has arisen with the arrival of Somali workers, many of whom were recruited by employers from elsewhere in the United States after immigration raids sharply reduced their Latino work forces.

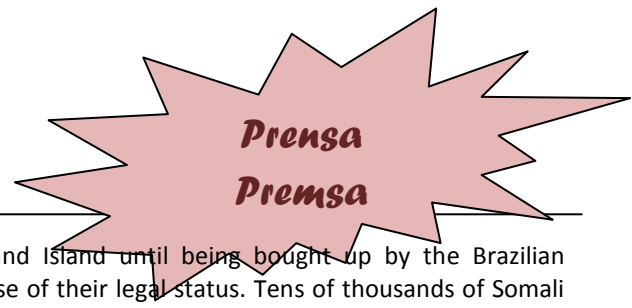
The Somalis are by and large in this country legally as political refugees and therefore are not singled out by immigration authorities.

In some of these places, including Grand Island, this newest wave of immigrant workers has had the effect of unifying the other ethnic populations against the Somalis and has also diverted some of the longstanding hostility toward Latino immigrants among some native-born residents.

"Every wave of immigrants has had to struggle to get assimilated," said Margaret Hornady, the mayor of Grand Island and a longtime resident of Nebraska. "Right now, it's so volatile."

The federal immigration crackdown has hit meat- and poultry-packing plants particularly hard, with more than 2,000 immigrant workers in at least nine places detained since 2006 in major raids, most on immigration violations.

Struggling to fill the grueling low-wage jobs that attract few American workers, the plants have placed advertisements in immigrant newspapers and circulated fliers in immigrant neighborhoods.



Some companies, like Swift & Company, which owned the plant in Grand Island until being bought up by the Brazilian conglomerate JBS last year, have made a particular pitch for Somalis because of their legal status. Tens of thousands of Somali refugees fleeing civil war have settled in the United States since the 1990s, with the largest concentration in Minnesota.

But the companies are learning that in trying to solve one problem they have created another.

Early last month, about 220 Somali Muslims walked off the job at a JBS meatpacking plant in Greeley, Colo., saying the company had prevented them from observing their prayer schedule. (More than 100 of the workers were later fired.)

Days later, a poultry company in Minnesota agreed to allow Muslim workers prayer breaks and the right to refuse handling pork products, settling a lawsuit filed by nine Somali workers.

In August, the management of a Tyson chicken plant in Shelbyville, Tenn., designated a Muslim holy day as a paid holiday, acceding to a demand by Somali workers. The plant had originally agreed to substitute the Muslim holy day for [Labor Day](#), but reinstated Labor Day after a barrage of criticism from non-Muslims.

In some workplaces, newly arrived Somali Muslims have not protested their working conditions. That has been the case at [Agriprocessors](#), a meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa. About 150 Somali Muslims have found jobs there, most of them recruited by a staffing company after the plant lost about half its work force in an immigration raid in May.

Jack Shandley, a senior vice president for JBS U.S.A., said in an e-mail message that "integrating persons of diverse backgrounds regularly presents new and different issues."

"Religious accommodation is only one workplace diversity issue that has been addressed," Mr. Shandley said.

Nationwide, employment discrimination complaints by Muslim workers have more than doubled in the past decade, to 607 in the 2007 fiscal year, from 285 in the 1998 fiscal year, according to the federal [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#), which has sent representatives to Grand Island to interview Somali workers.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbids employers to discriminate based on religion and says that employers must "reasonably accommodate" religious practices. But the act offers some exceptions, including instances when adjustments would cause "undue hardship" on the company's business interests.