

African Immigrants Refusing to Leave France

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BY CRAIG R. WHITNEY

PARIS, April 3 — Abdel Kader Wagué-Dodo arrived at Charles de Gaulle Airport nine years ago from the Central African Republic with a tourist visa, hoping for work and a better life.

That was still a time when France welcomed, or at least tolerated immigrants from its former African colonies.

But after a tide of immigration broke over Europe in the early 1990's, times changed. The French authorities stopped renewing Mr. Wagué-Dodo's residence permit in 1991 and he became an illegal immigrant.

This week he and 250 other Africans, mostly women and children, driven to the eastern fringes of Paris by their refusal to accept rejection, were huddled together against the cold in the Bois de Vincennes, in a theater complex — the third temporary shelter they have lived in over the last two weeks.

Their refusal to take no from the authorities is new, in an increasingly inhospitable Europe that is unable to deal with its chronic unemployment problem and prone to regard immigrants as scapegoats. But these people, many proudly wearing their African vestments from places like Mali, Senegal and Somalia, are neither homeless nor vagrant.

They are militants who over the last two weeks have been demonstrating for the right to stay, by occupying first a church and then a gymnasium in northern Paris to call attention to their demands.

"I have two children born in France before they changed the law, and they are French citizens," Mr. Wagué-Dodo said. "I've been two or three times to the prefecture to try to explain, but my wife has no papers!"

"Now I've been summoned to the police station, but I know that if I go, they'll handcuff me and put me on the next plane to Bangui," he said, referring to the capital of his native country. "I have nothing there, nothing."

So he stays with the rest in the Theater of the Cartoucherie, a former arsenal in the Bois de Vincennes famed for its dramatic productions. The theater's director, Ariane Mnouchkine, allowed the group to stay until next Wednesday, but has asked them to prevent others from joining them in the meantime.

The demonstrators are trying to work something out with the French authorities, but so far, the reactions augur little change of heart. Even

Africans have



African immigrants last week in a theatre complex in the Bois de Vincennes, Paris. About 250 immigrants living in the shelter refuse to be deported.

Taken shelter in a church, a gym and now a theater.

Abbé Pierre, a symbol of French tolerance in a country increasingly intolerant of foreign immigration, said last week, "France has a reputation as a welcoming country, but today, the problem is more than we can handle."

The African occupation of St. Ambroise Church in the working-Class 11th district of Paris ended when the police swooped in and expelled them, adult and child alike, before dawn on March 22, at the parish priest's request.

Two days earlier, the Archbishop of Paris, Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger, had visited the church to express sympathy and concern for the plight of the occupiers. "Churches are not zones beyond the law or rules of safety," the Cardinal said later. "What would have happened if there had been a panic in St. Ambroise?"

Cardinal Lustiger accused political groups that support refugees and asylum-seekers of using the Africans as pawns in a political struggle with the authorities. Immigration laws in France and Germany were tightened sharply in 1993 after a wave of foreign refugees poured into the continent following the

collapse of Communism in central and eastern Europe.

The most important groups active in arranging supplies of rice and milk for the Africans temporarily staying here are Rights First, an organization that supports the homeless, and S O S-Racism, which is associated with the opposition Socialist Party in France.

"We all pay rent and have homes," said Madji Guéne, a Senegalese mother who said her husband was legally registered and employed as a teacher near Paris. "We left our homes to demonstrate for the right to legal residence permits here," she said.

Though her husband had a job, she could not get a residence visa for herself or for two of their three children. "They are Senegalese," she said. "Everything has changed. Before, we used to be able to get papers in Dakar, and come and be welcome in France. Then the authorities got tough."

Prime Minister Alain Juppé promised close examination of each individual case for everyone involved in the occupation of the church. Mr. Wagué-Dodo said that nobody trusted in the assurance. "All I want from the French is recognition that I'm in a special situation," he said.

Exceptions are a thing of the past, and

the authorities are taken a hard line. They sent seven men without families arrested at St. Ambroise back to Africa at French Government expense, and flew back more than 800 other people to their places of origin last year.

"One of them called us from Mali after he got there and told us that he and his friends roughed up the French police who accompanied them after they arrived," said Diop Ababacar, one of the demonstrators at the Cartoucherie. "They told them that the French were no longer the masters in Mali," he said.

In all, the French authorities returned more than 10,000 would-be immigrants in 1995, according to official figures.

For asylum-seekers, the odds have mounted sharply, as they have all over Europe. Of the 19,000 applicants for political asylum in France, fewer than 3,000 were accepted, according to French Government authorities.

Even refugees from Algeria, a country racked by conflict between the Government and its Islamic fundamentalist opponents, got short shrift last year, according to official figures that showed that only 16 of the 2,208 Algerians who made their way to France and applied for refugee status in 1995 got it.