

Peace Corps couple leaves Fresno to work in Rwanda

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By Paula Lloyd / The Fresno Bee

Rebecca Asami and Logan Siler will become pioneers when they leave Fresno next week to serve with the Peace Corps in the Republic of Rwanda.

They are in the first group of Peace Corps volunteers to return to Rwanda since 1994, when the country was shattered by the ethnic slaughter of minority Tutsis and moderate Hutus by Hutus, the country's largest ethnic group. About 800,000 people were massacred within three months.

Asami, 25, and her companion Siler, 24, said they hope the Rwandans they meet and work with will get a better understanding of Americans - just as they will be getting a better understanding of Rwanda's people. Asami and Siler applied with the Peace Corps about two years ago, requesting to be placed in Africa.

"I have friends from Africa," Asami said. Her friends are from Senegal, on Africa's western coast, nearly a continent away from Rwanda on the East African plateau.

Her Senegalese friends have given her a love for African culture, Asami said. "They're like the warmest and coolest people I've ever met. They're really accepting about everyone."

Asami and Logan didn't know they'd be going to Rwanda until they were accepted by the Peace Corps. Since then, they've been researching the country.

They've learned about one prohibition: "It's not OK for outsiders to bring up the genocide," Asami said. They've also watched videos on Rwanda, where the tropical climate creates a lush forested landscape. "I've heard there are a lot of hills," Siler said. "It's called the Land of a Thousand Hills."

Adjusting to a warm, humid climate will be easy, said Asami, who likes hot weather better than cold, but getting to know the people of Rwanda could take longer.

"They're more reserved," Siler said. "It takes a long time for them to warm up to you."

The couple's living arrangements during their first three months could help bridge that gap: They'll be living with a Rwandan family.

For those three months, Asami and Siler will take daily classes sponsored by the Peace Corps in culture and language. The country's four major languages are Kinyarwanda, French, English and Swahili.

They'll be able to practice speaking with the family in the evening. "It's a good transition," Siler said. Asami said there's one cultural tradition that may be hard for her: Women wear skirts, not pants.

"That's the only change I'm worried about. This is how I dress every day," said Asami, dressed in a pair of faded jeans and a pastel print blouse.

After their initial training is over, they will work in clinics to help with HIV and AIDS prevention. Figures updated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in October show that slightly more than 3% of Rwanda's population aged 15 to 49 has HIV or AIDS, and more than 200,000 children have been orphaned by AIDS. Rwanda's population is about 10 million.

Volunteering isn't new to Asami and Siler, who have helped with the local Food Not Bombs effort for several years.

Siler also served as an AmeriCorps volunteer at the Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission Sanctuary, a youth center in downtown Fresno.

They leave behind jobs in education. Asami is a substitute teacher for the Fresno Unified School District, and Siler works with the afterschool program at Roosevelt High School.

Their families are worried and excited about them leaving for Rwanda, Siler said. "But they're thinking it's a great opportunity."