



PROFILE

Out of Africa: A polar researcher



By Jeff Inglis
The Antarctic Sun

Outside an elevated building near the South Pole, an Egyptian flag flaps in the polar wind. It belongs to Ashraf El Dakrouri, a laser scientist at the Aerophysical Research Observatory at South Pole Station.

El Dakrouri is the first Egyptian at the South Pole. For that matter, he pointed out, he is the first person from either an Arab or a Muslim nation to go to the South Pole.

It's a long way from Cairo to 90 degrees south, and El Dakrouri plans to winter at the pole as part of his research on the temperature of the mesosphere. He's never done anything quite like this before.

"I don't know what will happen," El Dakrouri said. But he is

in good spirits and is looking forward to the challenge. The experience may be even more difficult for him than for most pole winterovers.

El Dakrouri was married only a year and a half ago. He and his wife have a 6-month-old son in Cairo. They live with her family, and with his also nearby, there is plenty of help available.

"She lives with a lot of people, not like me," El Dakrouri said.

He asked his wife about the possibility of his coming to the South Pole. She was initially reluctant, he said, but she eventually agreed, on the condition that he call every week. He does, using the phone facilities available each weekend.

Being away from family is tough, El Dakrouri said. But being able to do this sort of work, and being a pioneer for African Antarctic research, are important, too, he said.

It has been especially difficult to be away from home recently, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. It is a time of fasting and then feasting, usually with family. El Dakrouri is alone this Ramadan.

"The Egyptian people prefer to spend Ramadan in Egypt," he said. "Next year I will spend Ramadan in Egypt."

The year after that, he things he might come back to Antarctica the following year.

Ramadan has been strange for El Dakrouri, too, since eating is forbidden between sunrise and sunset. In a land with 24-hour daylight, that doesn't quite work.

He knew he would have to deal with this, and asked religious leaders in Egypt what to do. They told him he could use the time of sunrise and sunset in the nearest country, so El Dakrouri is using New Zealand.

The fast is longer here, because of the higher latitude of New Zealand. In Egypt, he said, the time between sunrise and

sunset is usually 12 to 15 hours, but here it is nearly 18.

"I try to sleep," El Dakrouri said of how he spends his fasting time.

The galley staff at the station accommodate his unusual mealtimes, and help him avoid pork, a forbidden food for Muslims. They sometimes make a separate portion for him so it's hot when he comes in to eat around 8 p.m.

Ramadan recently ended. Instead of the traditional celebration marking the end of the month, El Dakrouri did something a bit different.

"I try to make something fun for my feast," he said. He headed to McMurdo for a couple of days to telephone his friends and family in Egypt.

He will return to Egypt at the beginning of next summer, to report back to the National Institute of Laser Science in Cairo, where he is a researcher, and to return to his teaching duties at Cairo University.

He feels some pressure now, though. Not only is his work new research, but he wants to become a better instructor as a result of his time here.

"I must take something higher to teach the students afterward," El Dakrouri said. "A lot of students have a lot of ideas."

He wants to encourage them to follow their dreams. He also hopes to make a good impression on the U.S. program and on his fellow researchers. He believes he is a representative of scientists from Egypt, Africa, and the Arab and Muslim worlds, who may one day work in Antarctica too.

"If you are the first person to do something, you want to do it very well," El Dakrouri said. "I am a beginning. I hope a lot of people come after that." ●



Ashraf El Dakrouri practices pool, a game he learned from his new friends at the South Pole Station. Photo by Jeff Inglis.