

Congolese (DRC) Refugees in Sub-Saharan Africa

I. Overview

The Resettlement Support Center (RSC) Africa is responsible for the processing of refugees throughout Sub-Saharan Africa for possible admission to the United States. An increasing percentage of the RSC Africa caseload is comprised of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a diverse country with some 250 ethnic groups and 700 languages. RSC Africa's Congolese caseload is also diverse, but ethnicities that have a history of persecution in the DRC, such as the Banyamulenge, Tutsi, and Hutu (also known as Banyarwanda) make up a third of RSC Africa's caseload. Other refugees being processed by RSC Africa are of the Bembe, Mushi, and Hutu ethnicities. These refugees, Priority 1 cases referred for resettlement by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), are primarily located in Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania.

II. The Congolese Experience in the Country of Asylum: Camps and Cities

Congolese in the USRAP pipeline are located in 20 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, with the majority being processed out of Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania. Refugees in these countries may be found in both camp and urban settings. The majority of individuals in the pipeline have had some form of education (60%), while 30% have reached secondary school or higher.

Rwanda hosts Congolese refugees in both camp and urban environments. As of 2012, Rwanda's refugee population reached 55,530, of which nearly all are from the DRC. The majority of these Congolese refugees live in camps, while a smaller number reside in the capital city, Kigali. According to UNHCR, refugees remain highly dependent on UNHCR for protection and assistance, while a lack of land, employment and limits on access to education hinder opportunities for self-reliance. Crowded shelters, poor soil, erosion and inclement weather further exacerbate harsh living conditions in the camp. ¹

According to the 2012 UNHCR country profile for Tanzania, 57,090 refugees from the DRC live in the country. The status of Nyaragusu Camp, where most Congolese refugees reside, will be reviewed in 2012; however, UNHCR expects that the camp will remain open with particular attention focused on vulnerable refugees. It is anticipated that refugees from the DRC will decide in 2012 whether to repatriate to their country of origin or remain in Tanzania. ²

¹ UNHCR. "[2012 UNHCR County Operations Profile – Rwanda.](#)"

² UNHCR. "Global Appeal 2012-2013 – United Republic of Tanzania. Pg. 40."

According to USCRI, as of 2009, Uganda hosted upwards of 155,000 refugees and asylum seekers from the DRC.³ Refugees in Uganda are protected under the Refugees Act 2006 which affords registered refugees the same rights in many instances as Ugandan nationals. These rights include: the right to primary education and work; to free movement within the country; to establish businesses without permits; to own property, both movable and immovable, and to acquire assets.⁴ Despite being afforded more rights than many Congolese refugees in other countries of asylum, refugees in Uganda do not enjoy social security, unemployment or disability benefits, and are not protected by labor laws.⁵ Also, there have been reports of refugees in Kampala being flogged by police officers and forced to relocate to Nakivale Refugee Camp.⁶ Refugees dwelling in camps have fewer opportunities for education and employment. Health and nutrition continue to be problematic as “51.2 percent of children under five years of age and 26 percent of women are anemic.”⁷

III. Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URMs)

The Congolese caseload is a source of a number of the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URMs) resettled by the USRAP. Congolese URMs are spread throughout Sub-Saharan Africa but are predominantly in Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, and Tanzania. According to RSC Africa data, Congolese nationals with guardians are more likely than other nationalities to choose the URM foster care program. Yet the majority of minors that enter the URM foster care program in the U.S. will have relatives or non-relative connections also being resettled to the same general geographic area, with whom they already have relationships and from whom they may derive emotional support.

IV. Cultural Orientation

A. Training Overview

RSC Africa conducts Cultural Orientation (CO) classes in various Sub-Saharan African countries hosting Congolese (DRC) refugees, with trainers most frequently travelling to Rwanda, Zambia, Tanzania, Cameroon, South Africa, and Uganda. RSC Africa also hosts CO trainings in its offices for urban-based refugees in Nairobi, Kenya. Classes are offered to individuals aged 15 and above who are approved for U.S. resettlement. For those under the age of 15, child minding is provided. Attendance amongst the Congolese (DRC) refugees is high, often with nearly 100% of the individuals scheduled for training in attendance.

To encourage participatory learning, an effort is made to restrict class sizes to a maximum of 25 to 30 participants. Classes are divided by language so as to limit the number of interpreters needed. Interpreters are necessary for Congolese Kiswahili, Kinyarwanda, Kinyamulege, Lingala, Kirundi, and French, and are secured by RSC Africa staff in advance of the training.

CO classes are intensive and conducted over three, six-hour days. Covered during the training are the topics outlined in the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) “Welcome to the U.S.” guidebook, with an

³ United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, *World Refugee Survey 2009 - Uganda*, 17 June 2009, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a40d2b5c.html> [accessed 17 April 2012]

⁴ *World Refugee Survey 2009 - Uganda*

⁵ *World Refugee Survey 2009 - Uganda*

⁶ *World Refugee Survey 2009 - Uganda*

⁷ UNHCR. Uganda: 2012 UNHCR Country Operations Profile. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e483c06.html>

emphasis placed on key content objectives. Efforts are made to tailor the curriculum to the special needs of the population served. Trainers use tools and techniques such as pictures, debates, group exercises, and videos to convey key concepts. Based on classroom observations in the field, CO trainers have noted that Congolese (DRC) participants tend to be very lively and ask numerous questions.

CO classes are also provided for URM's ages 6 and above and their guardians. URM classes are conducted over three, one-hour sessions using the CAL-developed "On Their Way" curriculum. Like the other CO classes are offered by RSC Africa, URM's classes are experiential and learner-based.

B. Hopes, Fears and Questions

Trainers begin each CO session by posing three questions to participants: "What do you know about the United States? What do you fear about the United States? What do you expect from your life in the United States?"

While a myriad of responses are generated, the Congolese share some common hopes and fears. Many express a desire to thrive in a peaceful culture – to obtain a job, and to eventually own a car and a home. Others express fears of racial and religious discrimination, homosexuality, falling victim to high rates of divorce, separation of families, meeting perpetrators of violence in the U.S., natural disasters, cold weather, and unfamiliar foods. A common question asked by the Congolese is "How will I discipline my children in the U.S.?" This question arises from discussion in CO sessions around unacceptable and illegal methods of disciplining children (hitting and beating) that are common within the Congolese refugee community. Alternative methods of disciplining children such as time-outs, taking away television privileges or taking away playtime with friends for younger children and taking away phone or car privileges or grounding for older children are discussed during the sessions. Pages from the publication, *Raising Children in a New Country: An Illustrated Handbook*⁸ are used. However, many of the participants doubt that such methods will work with their children. Domestic service providers can further support Congolese refugee families by discussing appropriate discipline practices and offering parents additional information or resources if they face disciplinary issues. Hearing the same message from Congolese that have already been living in the U.S. or through their local church may also prove to be effective.

C. Strengths and Challenges

According to a UK study on Congolese culture, Congolese refugees are likely to view resettlement as an opportunity to improve their lives.⁹ This assertion is supported by CO classroom observations, where Congolese refugees display striking optimism and a strong determination to succeed in the U.S. However, this optimism may be tempered by challenges such as limited English abilities. For example, according to RSC Africa data, only 25 percent of the Congolese population eligible for resettlement speaks some level of English. To further compound this difficulty, many refugees report gaps in their education, and limited vocational training opportunities, due to conflict or lack of funds. Further challenges facing the group may include trauma and separation of families.

⁸ *Raising Children in a New Country: An Illustrated Handbook*. BRYCS. 2007, available at: <http://www.brycs.org/documents/RaisingChildren-Handbook.pdf>

⁹ "A Guide to Congolese Cultural and Social Norms." Refugee Council. December 2004. Page 11

Managing Expectations

Many Congolese refugees have attained success in their countries of asylum, some owning property, land, and attaining leadership positions in their communities and places of worship. There is an expectation that this type of success will continue and be easily replicated in the US. Others have made clear their intention to find jobs in their chosen career fields. CO trainers have stressed that life in the US will initially be challenging, and require refugees to develop self-sufficiency quickly, often accepting entry-level positions in fields other than their own.

Limited Work Experience

The educational background of the Congolese caseload varies from pre-literate to advanced and professional degrees. It is important to note that some Congolese refugees will have worked in their countries of asylum, where those rights are afforded, while others may not have had the opportunity. Still others may have gained vocational skills training, as in Rwanda, where tailoring, welding, and carpentry livelihood projects are supported. The diversity of the Congolese caseload makes it difficult to draw generalities about the abilities of refugees; however it should be noted that Congolese refugees express a desire to succeed in the U.S.

Employment & Religion

Cultural Orientation trainers have observed that some Congolese refugees express concerns about being able to attend church on their chosen day of worship. This has been especially pronounced amongst Seventh Day Adventists who express an unwillingness to work on Saturdays. CO trainers have stressed that attaining self-sufficiency through employment must be a priority. Further, many Congolese refugees demonstrate an interest in continuing their roles of leadership in their religious communities and holding public religious meetings.

VI. Considerations for Domestic Providers

The average case size for Congolese nationals is 5.3, yet the Congolese concept of family extends beyond the western nuclear family. As such, many Congolese expect that extended families will reside together. While this is addressed with them in cultural orientation, resettlement agencies should be aware of this when addressing housing for the Congolese caseload.

The prolonged conflict, and the nature and brutality of the violence, including sexual violence, in the DRC may have a lasting impact on refugees. It is anticipated that many refugees may benefit from psycho-social support and medical attention for injuries and traumas sustained in their country of origin and countries of asylum. Women and girls will likely need special attention as possible survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

During CO trainings, Congolese refugees report fearing the recession and the high cost of living in the U.S., as well as the challenge of disciplining their children in accordance with US laws. Although lessons in financial literacy and U.S. laws comprise core components of cultural orientation trainings, upon arrival, refugees may benefit from further life skills trainings, such as money management, vocational development, and parenting, to help refugees achieve self sufficiency and positive acculturation.