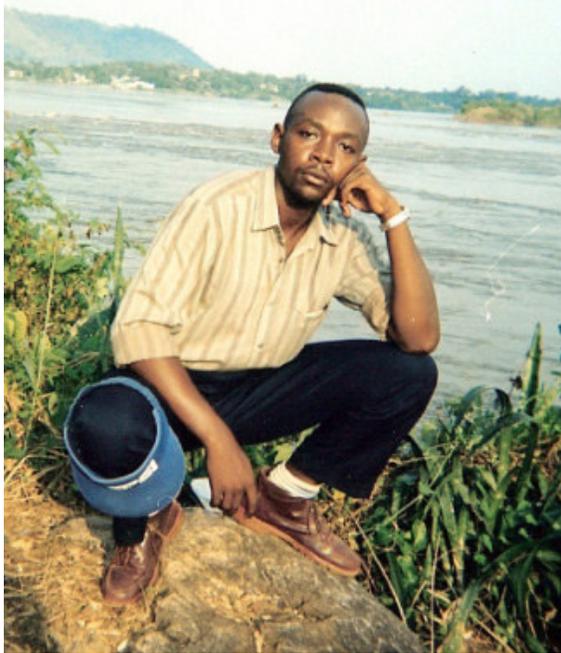


## From refused to refugee: Struggling for acceptance

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*Olivier Nyirubugara, in Bangui, CAR, August 1998*

In August 2004 I visited Paris and met some of the former senior officials of the Central African Republic (CAR), who had run away after the coup of March 15, 2003. I was a refugee in that country when General Francois Bozize ousted Ange Felix Patasse, and was able to cover the events as a journalist. One of the ex-officials I met in Paris was the same person who had repeatedly announced on national radio in the early 2000s that Rwandan refugees had to find another country to go to. Some fellow refugees had even been killed by government soldiers in previous conflicts while others had been forced into neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where they were given no option but to join rebel groups in the East.

“I haven’t managed to get a refugee status here”, the former official told me when I asked him about his situation. “I hope they will not end up deporting me back home”, he

added. While I listened to his moaning, my mind started replaying the horrible situation I went through some seven years before. In May 1997, together with thousands of other fellow Rwandans, I crossed the gigantic Oubangui River into the Republic of the Congo from the war-ravaged neighbour that was to be renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). After seven months of perilous walking westwards to escape the so-called first Banyamulengue fighters (Tusti populations in eastern DRC) and their Rwandan supporters, we finally thought we had arrived at a place that would accept and harbour us.

Until then the Republic of Congo had been a relatively calm and peaceful country. Villagers started to innocently call us refusés Rwandais (the refused Rwandan), as the word réfugiés was new in their vocabulary and difficult to pronounce for the mostly illiterate population. Only weeks after our arrival in that oasis of peace, the government of former president Pascal Lissouba gave that new term its true meaning. All the ‘refused Rwandans’ had to be repatriated by force as the country was collectively declaring them persona non grata. Ships were sent to the camps to take us to the capital Brazzaville, from where we should be flown back to our home country- the one that had previously ‘refused’ us and hunted us down in the DRC.

Thus, we started looking in all directions to see if any country would accept us. In fact, the only options were the CAR in the north and Gabon in the west. Those who thought Gabon was less dangerous were bitterly surprised. The country let them in, but then immediately flew them

home. I opted for the CAR, even though I knew the country had already issued instructions to not let any Rwandan in the country. We managed to safely cross the border into the CAR.

My face tried to express sympathy to the former CAR dignitary who was struggling to move from the 'refused' status to the more acceptable 'refugee' one that would entitle him and his family to some rights. My mind, however, could still hear his grave voice on national radio, and it was telling me: "The world is too small! The 'refusers' of yesterday are the refused of today. God avenges the forgotten ones". Another refuser, president Lissouba, found himself in an almost similar situation after his ouster by General Denis Sassou Nguesso. It is unclear what his current status is at his London exile. However, since Sassou Nguesso has prohibited him from returning home to run for president, Lissouba still appears to have the 'refused' status, at least in his home country.

My personal experience puts African nations at the centre of my reflection. Which African country wholeheartedly accepts foreigners on its soil? I am not even talking about refugees, but simply about foreigners who come in with visas and are granted residence permits. Many fingers will hasten to point and criticize European countries and forget that when one accusative finger points to someone, the remaining four point to the accuser. What about Gabon, South Africa, Morocco, and many other African nations, where foreigners - let alone refugees - are regularly harassed?

The current tendency in Europe is that immigration regulations are being tightened. French President Nicolas Sarkozy even clarifies things: he wants qualified skilled immigrants who could boost the labour market, not people who would potentially be a burden to society. I wish this were the case in South Africa, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. How do our countries of origin, African or otherwise, organise their own immigration policies? Are the regulations better than those we criticize in the West? Is there actually any policy apart from the one of systematically refusing foreigners? On a rational level, I believe I can partially answer these questions. However, like other long-time refugees, I went through multiple physical and psychological hardships before getting accepted at last. People like us have a different judgement as to what it means to be accepted or refused.

In late 2007, former UN Refugee Agency commissioner Ruud Lubbers was calling for the 'deverdonkization' of the Netherlands, referring to the somewhat xenophobic policies of former Dutch immigration and integration minister Rita Verdonk. "I call it the third liberation after the one from the Germans and the one from communism", said Lubbers (1). The first step of that process was the so-called 'generale pardon' that was granted to all asylum seekers who had entered the country before 2001. Over 20,000 people were then promoted from the 'refused' status to the 'refugee' one. While the gesture was significant and laudable, the expression used general pardon makes it sound as if there were some guilt on the part of the promoted 'refused'. One is pardoned for a crime or other offences. Otherwise, there is no reason to be pardoned. Is running away from danger an offence or a natural reflex? The French prefer to use the term 'regularisation', which infers somehow that the government accepts the guilt of keeping people under the irregular, 'refused' status.

## Note

1. Spits, dinsdag 13 november 2007, p.2.