

Assumani, a 15 year old Congolese separated minor living in South Africa

While most separated refugee children live with other refugees from their own country, or live in a shelter, Assumani, a resourceful 15 year old Congolese, lives with a South African family in a township in Johannesburg. Having spent nine months moving through six countries, Assumani is hoping to settle down.

Assumani is the youngest from a large family of seven children. They used to live in South Kivu Province. He remembers the mountains and the forests that surround Lake Tanganyika, and swimming in the lake. The war and upheaval in his home country, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the killing of his father in 1996 forced Assumani to flee, leaving his family behind. Assumani has not been able to locate his family since he left the DRC. He has no information on their whereabouts.

In December 2001, conflict erupted in the area where Assumani lived and went to school. He was attending a boarding school located about 15 kilometres from home. He was at school when the fighting started. The principal of the school directed the students to leave and return home to their families. Assumani and his classmates tried to find transport to go home but there was none available as everyone in the area was fleeing. The streets were full of people. He walked all the way home and found nobody there. The house was locked up. He went to his uncle's house which was nearby, but there was nobody there either.

Like everyone else, Assumani decided to run into the bush, where he stayed for four days with a family who tried to find his parents. He left with this family by boat, travelling for three days to Baraka, another village in the DRC. They spent one night there and left the following day by boat to Moyenga. The helpful family had no more money to pay for his fares, so they had to leave him behind in Moyenga where he stayed with the village chief for two weeks.

Security in Moyenga deteriorated, causing Assumani to flee with the village chief to go to Kigoma, Tanzania. There, he stayed for about two weeks in a refugee transit centre, before being sent on to another refugee transit centre in Zambia. He was moved on to a refugee camp in Malawi for about a week before being sent to Zimbabwe. He stayed in Harare for about three weeks in a Catholic Church. Throughout this time, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) was trying to find a guardian for Assumani but had no success. He met a Congolese man en route who organised transport for him to Swaziland, but the vehicle went to Johannesburg instead.

After two months of flight, Assumani arrived in South Africa in February 2002. At first, he stayed at a shelter for unaccompanied minors in an inner city slum of Johannesburg. An experience when strange men accosted and searched him for money scared Assumani and he wanted to leave the area as soon as possible. JRS organised for Assumani to attend a private school in Johannesburg. He now lives with a foster family which includes two boys aged 16 and 23. Assumani says he knows he is fortunate to live with a South African family but "they treat me like I'm from the Congo."

When asked to talk about the present and the future, Assumani replies, "I like South Africa because I am in peace....no running away all the time....I like South Africa because I am going to school. I want to go to university and get involved in the politics of my country". Assumani plans to return to the DRC when there is peace and the situation allows for return. He says he wants to contribute to the development of his country.