

From Congo to Uganda to America: Mulumba's family begins a new life

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Ms Benwamanzi Mulumba is wheeled to the departure gate at Uganda's Entebbe airport before flying to America

For a group of Congolese about to fly out of Uganda's Entebbe airport to settle in America, the mood around Benwamanzi Mulumba's family is markedly dull.

From three-year-old Kevin to 46-year-old Jeremiah Mbaha Munganga, nothing gives away any sort of excitement as the refugees are briefed by officers from IOM, the United Nations Migrations Agency.

I reach out to flat-faced Dorcas Munganga, 15. She did her Primary Leaving Examinations last year, but has been out of school, unable to raise the fees. Clearly, she must be excited to be heading to America!

"Not so much," she mumbles.

"Why?" I ask.

“Because I will miss my friends.”

“Yes, your friends!” I nod.

“I have left behind my best friend Ketsi. We have grown up together. We have been playing together.”

Dorcas’ sister Rachael is just as downbeat, almost absentmindedly pushing her luggage cart up the immigration desk queues.

“Kind of,” Racheal replies when I ask if she is thrilled to be going to America. “I will miss my ball. I really loved that ball.”

A keen rugby player, Rachael has been told she cannot take her inflated ball onto the aeroplane. Seeing how much this means to her, I ask various airport staff but no one can find a pin to deflate the ball, and everything else fails.

Still, the eight members of the Munganga family – accompanied by IOM’s Dr Philippa – are inching towards the Qatar Airways counter to check in their luggage. Having arrived in Uganda in 2004, they are relocating under the United States Refugee Admissions Programme (USRAP). The departure is organized by IOM Uganda, working closely with the Refugee Coordinator at the United States embassy, UNHCR, Office of the Prime Minister and the Nairobi-based Resettlement Support Centre (RSC).

Unlike Dorcas and Rachael and their seemingly unimpressible siblings, their father Jeremiah declares himself very happy to be going to America.

“I am feeling very excited. I am curious to see and discover the new place,” says Jeremiah, who has been working as a hairdresser and musician in Kampala, to support his family.

In Uganda, Jeremiah also got involved in charity work. He co-founded the Forum of Artists Associations of Refugees (FAARU) – Uganda Limited. FAARU organized several concerts, with the proceeds and donated items going to refugees or disadvantaged Ugandans, including children admitted to the Uganda Cancer Institute.

Part of the reason for Jeremiah’s excitement is his wife, Benwamanzi Mulumba, who looks weak, and needs a wheel chair and life-saving medical care. Jeremiah recalls a day in September 2016, when he feared the worst.

FAARU had organized a concert to support children with cancer. But for two weeks, his wife had been in and out of hospital, with some doctors suspecting she could be having a liver problem. Her eyes were yellow and her skin pale. Hours before the concert, someone called from Kiruddu hospital: Mulumba's blood level was very low; they feared she might not live much longer.

"I sang quickly and left," Jeremiah says. "But really my heart was now not in what I was singing. I had to run to my wife."

The doctors ordered a bone marrow test and the results were clear. Mulumba had leukemia. That was crushing for Jeremiah. Although the doctors in Mulago hospital were exceptionally helpful, Jeremiah feared the worst for this wife and mother to their growing children. And to him, this relocation to America, where Mulumba will be able to get top medical care, is a miracle.

"I think this is God doing this," Jeremiah says, more to himself. "And you know, I just heard that there were people negotiating for me, to help me."

That hope was dashed, with the up-and-down movement between the United States Government and the courts, particularly when it was declared that only people with close relatives in America could relocate to America. But eventually officials at various levels decided that the Munganga family could move to Tampa, Florida.

Talking about that journey, Jeremiah voices his gratitude, all the while shaking his head, unable to believe his luck.

Mulumba's thoughts seem far away, and her few words as low as her energy. Sometimes, when she wants to say something to her husband, she just lets her eyes pan from him to a child who is probably stepping out line. Then he says something to the child. And then she is back to herself.

Asked for her thoughts, Mulumba thanks "God for today", and thanks everyone who has helped her family to reach this stage, where she is hoping to get better treatment.

"I am happy that if God heals me, my life is going to change," Mulumba says, her husband interpreting.

For the IOM staff arranging the departure for today's group of 44, this is an intense logistical exercise. Someone is asking about a passport; another child wants to go to the toilet.

Everything must be right; everyone must be happy, including the burly police officer, who is concerned that the refugees – and their relatives who have come to see them off – are overcrowding the departure area.

“Take your people inside,” the officer tells IOM staffer Benson Tumuheki.

Benson pays him a frustrated but pleading look. He whispers some things to the officer and they agree that it's not worthwhile to take the group inside only to get them out in 30 minutes, with their many suitcases. These are suitcases that probably have all their lives in Congo and Uganda so far.

“Then you keep them in one place, because this place needs to be orderly” the afande says. Order indeed prevails, the queues move, and Munganga family is cleared.

As we move towards the departure gates, Rachael Munganga is still thinking about the ball she is leaving behind.

“Is it possible for you to take my ball; maybe IOM can keep it for me and maybe I will get it,” she says, and then looks away, before adding absentmindedly: “Somehow.”

And yes, this writer will take the ball to IOM.

Dorcas Munganga, 15, hopes to become a fashion designer and a writer. Sometimes, she says, when she had nothing to do, she would just sit with her best friend Ketsi and write stories in exercise books. She talks about her goodbye moment with Ketsi. She saw her last night. It was a sad conversation, but she has kept Ketsi's last words.

“I don't have anything to give you,” Ketsi started. “But you will stay in my heart and I will miss you!”



Some of the Mungangas in Tampa, Florida, just before a recent performance that featured Jeremiah.