

Outsider's journey through 'democratic' South Africa

Jean Pierre Lukamba fled the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2006. A well educated man from a middle-class family he was working for the United Nations in its logistics section when he was forced to leave. He told **Kally Forrest** how his life utterly changed when he became a refugee in South Africa.

Why did you come to South Africa?

In 2006 I was doing work for an opposition political party in the DRC and by mistake I opened a letter which showed that this party and Kabila's ruling party were in secret alliance. Once it was known I had seen this I was arrested and tortured. Look at my hands (Lukamba showed his severely scarred hands and wrists). A cousin who knew the party leader found out where I was and arranged for me to escape.

So I left DRC and my family with nothing. I made my way to Lubumbashi in the south and got a lift with a trucker transporting minerals to South Africa. It took four days to arrive at Musina.

I knew two things about South Africa: that it was a democracy so I would get better protection here than in other African countries and that it had a high crime rate.

What happened when you arrived?

I wandered around Musina, a stranger who spoke only French and broken English. I found a policeman and asked for food and water. He took me to Home Affairs where I got a transit permit to

reside in South Africa for 14 days.

Then I met a white man who ran a spaza shop who told me I should sleep on the station. I went there but I was afraid as people were loitering around so I returned to the police. In the end they locked me in a cell with petty thieves and promised to protect me. So my first night in South Africa I slept as a free man in a prison cell!

At 6.30am I left and went back to the white man. He was sympathetic and gave me R80 for a train fare to Johannesburg.

And when you reached Johannesburg?

I stepped out of the train and thought 'Where do I go now?' I sat in the corner of the station and observed. I heard people speaking Lingala (DRC language) and approached them but they too had just arrived and were on their way to Cape Town. They gave me R5 and left.

Then a Congolese man approached and said he was also a newcomer and he had a sister in Primrose. So we asked how to use the phone and with my R5 we phoned his sister but there was no answer.

We walked out the station and saw the Methodist Church. People told us we could sleep there or on the pavement without asking, so having found our night's accommodation we went to phone his sister again.

She soon arrived but explained that she had to prepare her white husband for us coming to stay with them. So she took us to Yeoville, Harley Street, and paid for a shared room and bought us food every third day. There were many people from DRC sleeping in that room and house.

After a month she told me I must make my own plans. She paid the rent for another month and took her brother to live with her.

Did you become legal?

Everyone told me that I must go to Home Affairs in Rosettenville to get papers so that I wouldn't get arrested. But how to get there? No money, new to Johannesburg. Someone explained the way and taught me to ask directions in English.

So I walked from Yeoville. I was so tired when I arrived. But to my misfortune Home Affairs had closed down recently and relocated to Pretoria.

In October my father sent me \$50 (R350). I was walking with this money with a friend to go and buy a phone when five tsotsis surrounded us near Ponte under the highway bridge. People had told me, 'Don't fight back, just give them what they want.' But I was desperate, I had to keep this money. So we fought and ran for our lives and then I pretended I had a phone and was talking to the police. And we shook them off.

Then I went to Pretoria to Home Affairs. You have to be in the queue by 4.30am to make progress. I waited in this queue with a number for two weeks. Many of us slept outside and it was October so it was raining. Some Muslim people brought us food – soup and beans, and a plastic to sleep under to keep out the rain.

Finally Home Affairs stamped my paper and gave me an appointment for the next day. But when I returned they denied that the paper was valid. I returned to Johannesburg, still illegal and not able to seek work.

In February 2007 I went back to Pretoria and slept three days outside. Then I was given a s 22 paper [of the Refugees Act, an Asylum Seeker temporary permit].

Were you then able to work?

While I was in the queue in Pretoria I met a guy from Burundi and he told me he could help me to become a car guard in Woodmead Mall. I had to pay R250 to a supervisor as a 'connection fee' and then he recommended me to Ushaka Security.

This money also paid for a bib and cap. They showed me which section I must guard and I made about R80 a day in tips. There was no salary. I was so exhausted the first day standing from 8am to 6pm, it's not easy to stand in the same place. But after a week I got more used to it.

I began to save and I bought goods to send back to DRC for my wife to sell – shoes, clothes, watches. This is a common practice. You can sell South African goods for three times the price in DRC. An agency sends a pack to DRC for R52. Later I sent laptops and other electronic goods to sell to embassies and foreign agencies that needed these things. And I began to make a decent living.

In February 2007 I moved to my own room in Frances Street, Yeoville and I bought some furniture. I paid R1 500 for a room, shared bathroom and kitchen. I also attended an

English course in the Yeoville library. In fact I had studied mechanical engineering at home but I had no papers to prove this.

Later, in March 2008 I moved into a room in Cleveland where a friend had a flat where I paid R1 000 a month.

So was this the end of your difficulties?

No, no. Then came the xenophobic attacks in May 2008

I went to work as usual but in the taxi people started talking Zulu to me. When I couldn't answer they began to rough me up so I jumped out of the taxi when it stopped at the lights.

Then my friend phoned and told me to come home quickly and get my things because people from neighbouring locations were attacking foreigners. I rushed back but it was too late, the police said it was too dangerous to go through. So I lost everything.

I went to the Cleveland police station with others and the government brought big tents and Gift of the Givers brought blankets. The commander of the police station was kind, she came every night to help. I worked in a small clinic there to help out.

On 6 June we were moved to a proper camp in Rifle Range Road and people organised themselves into six committees with a representative depending on their nationality.

After a while we were given the option of a safe passage home or registering if we wanted to stay in South Africa. I told the United Nations representative that I could not go back to DRC and I needed this registration card, which I got.

But the South African authorities did not explain well, communication was bad and people in the camp rejected the cards.

A rumour started in the camp that

Jean Pierre Lukamba



Lukamba (left) with other car guards at Woodmead Mall.



Lukamba stands next to the commander of the police station (front left) with peace marshals at the Rifle Range Road camp.

the UN had given me R400 000 to get people registered and people threatened to burn my tent. When the site manager left the camp that night, inmates rounded up four representatives and locked them in the manager's office and held them hostage. They demanded that the police call the UNHCR to explain things.

The next morning police shot at people with rubber bullets and removed these leaders from the camp. The crowd announced that they would kill everyone with a registration card. The police returned with big vans and removed people with cards including me. I was taken to another camp in Springs called Wts Road.

Later I returned to Rifle Range when most people had left and the Jesuit Refugee Service assisted me to find accommodation outside with R1 500 and a starter pack.

Then because of my experiences I set up a voluntary Refugee Help Desk in Pretoria.

You must have been happy to put this trauma behind you.

Yes, but it was not over.

One day I got a call from some

people who had been angry with me in the Rifle Range camp for registering to come and help them with their papers. They were now living in the North West. When I came to their home the police arrived and said they were arresting me on a charge of raping their daughter in the previous year.

I was taken to Booyens Police Station, moved to John Vorster, then Yeoville and finally to Hillbrow all within two days. I was arrested on 28 June [2009] and only appeared in court on 2 July.

The magistrate granted me bail but the police claimed I had no fixed abode so I had to go back to prison. I was taken to Sun City (Diepkloof Prison outside Johannesburg) and there I stayed for three months. The police sent a lawyer from the Legal Aid Board but he was not helpful. I explained that I had written down an address for the police but he claimed I had just come to South Africa to do crime and that I was illegal.

I wrote to Amnesty International and to the prosecutor telling them of my situation. I explained that I had been unlawfully arrested as it was more than 48 hours before I

appeared in court and my rights had not been respected.

On 3 February this year I appeared in court and I was told the case had been dropped because witnesses did not arrive. On release, I went from one police station to another trying to track my papers to prove my legality but I was moved too often and no one knew where they were. Finally they turned up at Yeoville Police Station but the investigating officer refused to release them and he never wrote my address in the docket. I went back to Home Affairs and got new papers.

So what do you think of South Africa's democracy?

Well I'm suing the South African police for unlawful practices through a law company, Webber Wentzel. I want to do this also for other people. There are many foreigners that sit for long periods awaiting trial. I am dealing with one case now of Ludovic Kayembe who has been in a single cell for two years since 2007 on a fraud charge. The authorities say he will escape if he is put with people.

South Africa's democracy? Well it still has a way to advance before it can be called a democracy. LB