

## **No Refuge**

Persecuted in their home countries, victimized by South African xenophobia and attacked by other refugees in displacement camps, the residents of an abandoned Pretoria tire yard don't know where else to turn.

By James Kindle

Two-and-a-half-year-old Elvira Guilherme is a playful toddler with a head full of tiny plastic daisy-clipped braids. She wears a green sweatshirt too big for her 2-foot frame and a floral teal skirt that flutters as she hops around. She combs her Barbie doll's thin red hair with a yellow comb that's too big for her tiny hand to maneuver. Her eyes sometimes cross when she's trying to get attention.

Nearly all of little Elvira's short life has been spent on the run from people who wanted to hurt her or her family.

When the Angolan government threatened her father for his political activities soon after her birth, she was taken from her home country to South Africa. When mobs of angry South Africans began killing foreign Africans and burning their businesses in her adopted city of Cape Town, she was taken to the Akasia displacement camp near South Africa's executive capital, Pretoria. And when other displaced foreigners, angry with her father for opposing a hunger strike that would have left her starving, organized children in the camp to assault Elvira as payback, she was taken to Malaf, an abandoned Pretoria tire yard that has become a refuge for dozens of foreigners also forced from their homes.

In this abandoned auto yard, where the Pretoria skyline looms over a paved lot with children bathing in buckets and a woman hanging clothes from lines strung across the yard, the Guilhermes and others like them are again building a new temporary home. Their walls are tires stacked against a concrete wall with rip-off Archie comic ads; their door is a piece of splintered plywood.

Elvira and her parents have been thrice displaced by violence, a desperate family driven from their homes by increasingly more desperate groups of people. And now they don't know where else they can go.

### **Without a home**

Leta Guilherme, a 27-year-old with a pretty face and fatigued brown eyes, is doing something she has grown accustomed to in the last few years: She's unpacking. All the Guilhermes have left are two suitcases of clothes, some toys, a couple cardboard boxes and a plastic bag filled with essentials like cornmeal, crackers, sugar and onions. Plus some diapers for Elvira.

The roaming lifestyle of Leta's family began two years ago, when her husband was working at a newspaper in the Angolan capital of Luanda. Then 27, Malcolm Guilherme began writing anti-government pieces and organizing protests and meetings about reforming Angolan politics.

"The government was not too happy for what we said because you know Angola, you know the culture...corruption, police, even the government used to kill people. People sometimes disappear," says Malcolm, a native Portuguese speaker.

Upon hearing that his life was in danger, Malcolm took his family and fled to Angola's border province, Cunene, then to South Africa.

But in Cape Town, where Malcolm worked at a fish market to support his family, the Guilhermes were still not safe. With South Africa suffering a 23 percent unemployment rate, according to the U.S. State Department, and widespread housing shortages, foreigners became an easy scapegoat for distressed native South Africans. Xenophobia festered, and foreign Africans faced increasing violence from natives, climaxing with attacks in May 2008 that left more than 60 people dead.

“Since I [have been] here is the first time we heard [about] xenophobic attacks,” Malcolm says. “This xenophobia [has resulted in violence] since 1994, but now it’s coming like explosion.”

After Malcolm's co-worker was killed in the violence, he took his family to Pretoria, where they moved into a U.N.-provided tent in the Akasia displacement camp. At the 1,500-person camp, Angolans like the Guilhermes lived with Ethiopians, Ugandans, Rwandans, Burundians, Somalis and other nationalities. Each country picked one person to represent that nationality's interest at meetings with government and U.N. officials. The Angolans selected Malcolm.

It didn't take long for trouble to start.

### **Refugees against refugees**

From the beginning, residents of Akasia had problems with food shortages, infrequent water supplies and what they felt was lack of protection by security officials, according to media reports. But Shaqirah Kyefwa, a Ugandan emigrant who was also

forced out of Akasia because of violence, says a major point of contention was political: What should happen to the displaced foreigners when the camps were shut down? Should they be reintegrated into South African society, repatriated to their home countries or resettled in another country, like Canada, the U.S., Australia or somewhere in Europe?

The majority of camp residents, Kyefwa says, favored resettlement, though she doubted this possibility. “I know it wouldn’t be there right from the start. Resettlement can’t happen,” she says. “Where are you going to take them?”

But other foreigners pushed for resettlement, particularly those from more northern African countries like Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. Their thinner statures and lighter skin tones made them more easily recognizable as non-South African and easier targets of persecution. To bolster this demand, representatives of these countries pushed for a hunger strike. At the end of May they began blockading and attacking aid workers trying to get food to the camp, according to media reports.

But Malcolm, who was open to reintegration, opposed the strike. “I cannot let the [Somalis and other pro-resettlement residents] to avoid the food to get inside because we have children in there.”

Malcolm’s public opposition drew the anger of other residents from the northern African and Rwanda and Burundi sections of the camp. They threatened Malcolm and his wife, and on the last Saturday in June they organized a group of young children—only 5 to 10 years old, Kyefwa says—to retaliate by beating Malcolm’s young daughter, Elvira.

Malcolm, who had been away from his family on the day of the planned attack, almost had to stand and watch while his family was assaulted. “I was tried to go there. The police they stopped me, [saying], ‘No, you know if you go, you know those guys,

they wait for you in the gate.’ I saw them. It was a mob. They say, ‘Come, come, we’re going to hang you with the wires.’ But then, I just say, ‘Please, please, just going to fetch my wife.’”

Police removed Elvira and Leta before they could be harmed.

Now living in the abandoned tire yard, Malcolm is still looking over his shoulder. A towering man, his height makes him imposing despite his kind face and casual outfit of jeans and a baseball cap. Malcolm knows that only the awning over his head, with plastic sheeting draped down for better weatherproofing, protects his family from the elements—and people who might harm them.

“I’m not safe because we don’t have police patrol,” he says. “We don’t have securities. This gate always open. Somebody can come in here, can do something. You just sit in here because you’re afraid to go out.”

### **“Bitch,” “Traitor,” ‘Betrayed”**

Just three spaces down from the Guilhermes lived Shaqirah Kyefwa, who was also persecuted for her ambivalence over resettlement. Kyefwa, 24, is from the Ugandan capital of Kampala. She was forced to come to South Africa in 2006. While working as a poll supervisor, she refused to participate in election fraud to re-elect Uganda’s president. This made her a target of government officials, who falsely accused her of murder in order to lock her up or have her killed.

“[You] either can disappear and your family doesn’t know where you’ve gone, or you can be taken to prison. They can do anything to get rid of you,” she says. “Instead of disappearing, I have to do something and get out.”

So Kyefwa traveled to Kenya and then to South Africa, where she lived in a flat above a shop in Johannesburg. On May 20, 2008, this world fell apart when a mob set the shop on fire. She fled to live with a friend in Pretoria until she learned about the Akasia displacement camp.

“When the shelters opened up, I thought maybe they would comfort us,” she says. “That’s what I hoped, but unfortunately that’s not what happened.”

Instead, Kyefwa was selected as a representative of the Ugandan residents, the way Malcolm was for the Angolans. Though nearly everyone she spoke to wanted to be resettled, some Ugandans favored reintegration—a fact she confided to a journalist who came to the camp.

When the story came out, the camp turned on Kyefwa.

“Everyone was calling me names—a ‘bitch,’ a ‘traitor,’ a ‘betrayer.’ How could I talk about reintegration? I could only talk about resettlement,” she says. “I couldn’t do that. Why? I had to talk for the few, the some and the majority.... There are very few people for reintegration. Some wanted repatriation. The majority want resettlement.”

Feeling palpable hostility from the camp’s residents, Kyefwa began looking for other accommodations and ended up spending several days at the Malaf tire yard, but on June 27—the day the Guilhermes were targeted—Kyefwa had come back to Akasia. “[Pro-settlement groups] had become like animals now,” Kyefwa says. “Malcolm was also talking about reintegration, like me, so he became a victim, like me.”

After her return, Kyefwa decided to sleep in a different tent—a choice that likely saved her life. That night, camp residents set Kyefwa’s tent on fire, trying to kill her. She awoke to see her second home in less than a month ablaze.

The next day she relocated to Malaf but moved out less than a week later, worried by the lack of security. “Anybody can come with a gun and shoot you and go out.” She now works at a pharmacy to afford food and rent for a flat in central Pretoria she shares with three others.

She must walk to work every day, traveling on roads where she faces the hatred of xenophobic South Africans or angry Somalis and other nationalities. She says these journeys leave her vulnerable. “If [the people who attacked me] sit down and think individually, I just pray they don’t hurt me. If they don’t have time to think, [when] I walk on the streets, they’ll kill me. I know it.”

### **Caught between two worlds**

So now, Kyefwa and the Guilhermes are stuck, rejected by multiple communities, perpetually worried that they’ll again be targeted by either South Africans or fellow internally displaced foreigners. “The people who robbed our shops, the people who killed our friends, they’re still there,” Kyefwa says. “I’m not safe with the foreigners. I’m not safe with the South Africans. What can I do? There’s nothing I can do.”

Malcolm is sure the refugees who attacked him and his family are still looking to exact the revenge that narrowly escaped them. Kyefwa has been getting phone calls from camp residents or their acquaintances, saying they’re looking for her. She says she isn’t sure she will live to see her upcoming birthday.

Akasia closed on August 15. Both know that all the residents are now out and might be looking for them.

The question that remains, the question that nearly caused Kyefwa and the Guilhermes to be beaten or killed, is where the Ugandans, Angolans, Somalis and all other desperate foreigners can go from here.

Malcolm says he'd like to go to France, where his mother and sisters live after leaving Angola's violence for Saint-Étienne, but he knows that with no money and misplaced passports, that dream is unlikely to come true.

Kyefwa knows that she too will likely have to remain in South Africa. "The only option I have is to wait here until the day I die," she says, though she dreams of going somewhere safe. "Anywhere there's no problem. I don't care if it's in Africa or out of Africa."

Anywhere but here.

"In South Africa people don't respect human life," Malcolm says. "You can kill for nothing, you know."

Kyefwa adds, "It's the cheapest thing in South Africa. Life is very cheap."

As her father speaks, Elvira plays with her doll and drinks cherry juice from a small plastic container. She shifts between smiling and grimacing, eyes crossed, at the photographer snapping her picture. When shown her photo on the camera's small LCD screen, she smiles and points to herself. Then the little girl giggles.