

Uganda

Rapid route to reuniting Congolese refugee children in Uganda with their families

Meet Rosete, Birungiste and Samuel, three children who fled conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, only to wind up separated from their families in a Ugandan transit centre. See how an advance in technology can speed locating their families.



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Two boys wait to be offloaded from a truck carrying more than 100 Congolese refugees who arrived at the Bubukwanga transit centre in Bundibugyo District, Uganda. As rebels and government troops clash, fleeing children are sometimes separated from their families.

everyone scattering in different directions. She followed other fleeing adults, eventually making her way to the Busunga border post, where she boarded a truck that brought her to Bubukwanga transit centre in Bundibugyo District, Uganda. She had no idea where her parents and sisters were.

A transit centre is a safe area at which refugees stay temporarily. Afterwards, they may return to their home country, if circumstances permit, or can transfer to a camp designed for longer-term living.

When Rosete entered Bubukwanga, she was immediately identified as an unaccompanied minor, as she had been separated from her parents and other relatives and was not being cared for by an adult who was responsible for doing so.

Rosete is registered by RapidFTR

Rosete was registered by the Uganda Red Cross using the innovative digital registration tool Rapid Family Tracing and Reunification (RapidFTR). RapidFTR was developed by UNICEF to support the fast registering of unaccompanied and separated children.

This cell phone-based system enables information about each child to be saved into a shared database. First used in Nyakabande transit centre and Rwamwanja refugee settlement camp in February 2013, RapidFTR has reduced the time required for information to become available from more than six weeks to a matter of hours. The

By Tanya Accone

BUNDIBUGYO, Uganda, 5 August 2013 – Ten-year-old Rosete Simanyi's dream was to attend school. But her family could not afford to send her and her three younger sisters. Rosete* was needed for household chores, such as fetching water and firewood and helping to do the washing.

Rosete's work did not prevent her from stopping to observe lessons at the school, as she went about her domestic chores in the town of Kamango, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Rosete: From chores – to refugee

Recently, fighting broke out in Kamango between government troops and a rebel group. When the rebels attacked, Rosete fled along with the other inhabitants,

children's details had previously been recorded on paper and transported to offices in different countries. Now, authorized staff have access to the information the moment it is uploaded to the database.



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Mark Safari, Tracing Officer of the Uganda Red Cross, uses an innovative digital registration tool developed by UNICEF to support the fast registering of unaccompanied and separated Congolese refugee children at the transit centre.

Bubukwanga, the information captured in RapidFTR was used to verify and reunite her with her aunt. Rosete has moved out of the tent designated for unaccompanied minors and separated girls to a communal shelter with the aunt. Her situation will be routinely monitored to ensure she is being well cared for.

"Now, we have the information we need in our pockets at any moment," says Mr. Safari.

Birungiste finds calm

Birungiste, 9, was worried about her safety and future when she fled to the transit centre in Uganda. "My mother is divorced from my father a long time, and my father has died," she says.

Birungiste broke her leg when she was younger. It did not set properly, so she relies on a crutch to move around. This disability makes her especially vulnerable at the transit centre.

Birungiste drew comfort from seeing some familiar faces from her village, fellow refugees who had fled together. She spotted her sister-in-law and alerted Senior Tracing Assistant at the Uganda Red Cross Bwambale Expechito. After Uganda Red Cross had verified the relative, Birungiste moved into a family tent. Birungiste's aunt located her older sister Rose, who had arrived at the centre earlier.



The Uganda Red Cross uses RapidFTR to facilitate its care for children who are unaccompanied, and Save the Children uses it for registering children separated from their parents or primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives.

RapidFTR uses the same type of security as mobile banking to ensure that family-tracing information, especially photos, is accessible only by authorized users to protect these vulnerable children.

Rosete: A relative found

Rosete remembers answering questions and having her photo taken by Tracing Officer of the Uganda Red Cross .

"I was hoping for assistance," she reflects.

Just three days after Rosete had arrived at

"My mind is now beautifully calm. I am happy," she says. Her hopes are now focused on going back to school and regular domestic chores. "School is what I like most," she says. "I am in primary one, and I want to go back to school."

Samuel misses school

Education is also on 15-year-old Samuel's mind. He fears the worst about his parents' fate. "I am alone. I am all alone," he says. He hopes to be reunited with the aunt with whom he had been living near Kamango before fleeing alone to Uganda when rebels attacked.

Rosete, 10, is one of the 63 out of 122 unaccompanied Congolese refugee children who have been reunited with their families at the transit centre.

Samuel has become somewhat of a leader among the boys, a group of whom follow him around the refugee transit centre. His most pressing concern is the effect his

displacement is having on his schooling.

"I only have three more years of school before I will take my exam and finish," he explains. "I am losing time now when I should be studying. And what will happen if I cannot continue my schooling in French? English is difficult to learn. I think that if I will have to go to school in English, it will take me much longer."

Mr. Expechito has interviewed Samuel and captured his details in RapidFTR.

To date, 63 out of 122 unaccompanied children have been reunited with their families. If Samuel cannot be reunited with his family, he will have the option of being fostered by another refugee family, with his care routinely monitored.

* Some names have been changed.

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