

STANDING ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

When Gode Mfashingabo was rescued by his father he just had his life to take with him, but he came close to losing it many times in the dangerous journey that followed. It was only his hope of finding a new home that kept him going. He spoke to **REBECCA HINCHEY**.



Crouching on a tiny window ledge, seven-year-old Gode Mfashingabo trembles as the beams of the soldiers' torches inch across the blackened classroom and their heavy boots bang against its floor. "Don't move," he says to himself. "Don't sneeze, don't breathe too loud. Squeeze your eyes shut and pray hard. Maybe you will live. Hopefully you will live. Please God let me live."

"There's no one here, move on," barks the leader and the soldiers leave.

It's four in the morning and everything is still. Gode's uncle gathers his young charges and takes them home, safe now, at least until dawn.

"The next morning we went to school. Some of the students were missing," Gode explains. "My uncle was the head teacher. He told us to pack our things and leave. We'd be dead now if they had found us."

Although Gode is now an Australian citizen he has lived much of his 29 years as a member of a minority group. Whether as Banyamulenge-Tutsi, Congolese, Tutsi, African or Australian he's long felt as if he were an outsider looking in, and has come close to death more than once as a result.

The Banyamulenge-Tutsi are an ethnic minority who have called the Democratic Republic of Congo (the Congo) their home since escaping from Rwanda in the latter half of the 1800s. Tensions between this group and others in the Congo and neighbouring Burundi have steadily increased since the 1970s, leading to frequent bouts of bloody conflict.

When he was eight years old Gode lived for a time in the highlands of Congo with his grandparents, learning from them about his cultural roots. They were part of a small group of Banyamulenge-Tutsi in the area, forbidden from speaking their language or practising the traditions of their ancestors. "In the mountains of Congo none of us children could be out on our own. If we were going to collect water or anything like that, at least three of us would go, just for safety. It was the same for the Banyamulenge-Tutsi women, they always took a few men out with them for protection," Gode recalls.

"Everyday we were taunted by the other kids, 'we're going to kill you, we're going to kill you'. We would be ambushed; we'd get flogged on the way to school. Of course we gave back what we got," he says.

When Gode was 10 years old his father, who was at the time a laboratory technician in the Seventh Day Adventist Church hospital in Kenya, came to take him back with him. Once again Gode packed up his meagre belongings and went to start life in a new place. With its English influences, Kenya seemed foreign to central Africans like Gode who had grown up with the legacy of French colonialism.

"I was the odd one out. I was the only one without a Kenyan surname, I had an African name," Gode laments. "I was teased a lot. I could only communicate in Swahili at school, while the rest could communicate in English. All of a sudden I was the kid from Congo. In Congo I

hadn't fit in, in Burundi I hadn't fit in and in Kenya it turned out I didn't fit in either!" Gode laughs at the irony.

Like many young refugees, Gode learned fast. Two years after arriving in Kenya he was fluent in English, had almost caught up at school and nurtured dreams of becoming a soccer star. "Sometimes I would train secretly with a group who worked with street kids. The segregation of communities limited how you could participate. I played mostly with the Kenyans and only with other kids if it was just for fun." The pleasures of playing sport erased some of the hardship and suffering felt by the young man but there were other problems: "I had talent growing up, but a lack of facilities and support cost me opportunities." Despite the difficulties, for a short while Gode's future looked bright.

In 1998 the Congo slid back into war and Gode's hopes of a brighter future sank. In his homeland, the Congolese Rally for Democracy, or RCD, often aligned with the Banyamulenge, broke away from the Congolese government. Thousands of kilometres away from his birth country Gode was now stripped of his Congolese citizenship and together with his father became stateless in his adopted Kenyan home.

Gode was no longer permitted to study, his father lost his job and, but for the help of a compassionate landlord, they would have lost their home. Most serious was the threat by the Kenyan government to deport the family to Congo. News that came of the treatment of their fellow tribesmen in the central African nation filled the pair with terror.

In Congo, the government was shooting openly at Banyamulenge-Tutsi people. Men, women, children, the sick and the old were all being rounded up and placed in detention. In one terrible incident hundreds of people were held naked for days until the International Committee for the Red Cross intervened.

"On national radio and TV cabinet ministers would say we were vermin," Gode recounts.

Fearing for their lives, Gode and his father approached the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) for protection and obtained papers in 1999. This gave them breathing space and allowed them to remain in the marginally safer Kenya. The papers also placed the family in a predicament. Gode was 19 and no longer a dependant of his father. The papers allowed his father to remain in the capital, but Gode was required to leave for Kenya's notoriously dangerous refugee camp, Kakuma. Gode and his father appealed the decision again and again. Seven times Gode pleaded with the authorities to allow him to stay in Nairobi with his father and seven times his pleas hit a brick wall. It was Kakuma or nothing, take it or leave it. He was faced with a terrible choice – violence and the threat of death in Kakuma or almost certain death in the Congo.

So in 1999 Gode arrived, to begin life, in the camp. Kakuma was a microcosm of the inter-ethnic conflicts in the Congo. Memories of the terrible experiences of his

uncles in the Congolese section of Kakuma, when inter-ethnic hatreds were played out by all sides, filled him with dread. He gained some comfort from the assurance by the UN authorities that he would be placed in the Special Protection Area but it proved to be a hollow promise. To his horror, on the very first night at Kakuma he was sent to live in the Congolese section. Here Gode found some residents who were friendly but for the most part sensed hatred directed towards him.

"Your people killed our people," they yelled at him. Gode protested that he hadn't been in the Congo for four years and that people on all sides were being killed, but to no avail. The mood was poisonous, the air thick with the pain and hatred that war and violence creates.

Thanks to the kindness of a small number of Congolese families who took him into their home and stood up to those who threatened to harm him, Gode found some safety and relief. He kept quiet to survive and never went anywhere without the presence of his new protectors. As time passed the community's anger subsided a little. Small joys became big events. "Having a [soccer] match to look forward to helped a lot. We'd all be hunched up to the BBC radio commentary, or crowded around the television."

This more peaceful period ended in April 2000 when anger and inter-ethnic tension resurfaced in the camp. The catalyst was news that a small group of Banyamulenge orphans were coming to Kakuma before being resettled in a third country. The situation became very dangerous for Gode in the camp. "See what we told you" they said. "First one comes then they all move in." Gode was accused of being a spy for the RCD.

"It was alleged that I was collecting information and passing it back to Rwanda and Congo. There was an extraordinarily long meeting held. With every contribution things got more heated. People would get up and face me, pointing their fingers and I could see the veins in their faces. They were accusing me of all the trouble. They said 'We'll be overrun, they will kill us.'"

One of Gode's flatmates told him to leave. "He escorted me to a friendly Congolese family's house where they showed me mercy. Later, after the meeting I went back to my house. There were rumblings, people discussing what to do with me. Some neighbours came and said 'Things are bad, don't leave your housemates, bad things might happen.'"

"I had a sleepless night. All I could think about was my life, about survival. I thought they might storm the house to kill me or beat me up." For three weeks Gode remained with his flatmates, all the while making plans for a safer future.

"At that time I was volunteering with a charity group which taught English in the camp, I was doing general administrative sort of stuff. I had access to the UNHCR office so I spoke with the community services officer. I asked her to help me but urged her not to reveal my request to anyone in the camp. The community leader

of my section of the camp, Laurent*, had been there a long time. He passed information about my request to the community services officer. He said 'We spared you, now you go to the UN against us!' Every letter I gave to my community leader requesting an audience with UN officers he had kept. He collected all the information and letters and used them against me. Things reached a crescendo when another adult Banyamulenge-Tutsi, was sent to the camp."

"Accusations were made; 'He's a soldier, he's in the military special forces'. They were lies but it didn't matter. The crowd got very rowdy. People picked up weapons and marched towards the man's house, demanding blood. The community leaders said they shouldn't do it, that harming him would get everyone in trouble. But others said they were happy to be gaoled if it meant killing a Banyamulenge. They had machetes and were shouting loudly. We could hear them. They were going to kill him.

"They chased him from the house and took his belongings. He raced from the camp with the community right behind him and made it to the UNHCR compound. The mob turned back to my house to look for me. They said 'Bring him out or we'll burn the house down.' The community leader came saying 'Where is that killer, that murderer, that spy?' My flatmates didn't want to let me go.

"I was petrified. I didn't want my flatmates to be hurt so I gathered my belongings. 'If I can be assured a safe passage I'll leave,' I said to the community leader." In this way Gode managed to arrive at the UNHCR compound to join his kinsman.

For days the authorities argued about what to do with their two new charges. The Protection Officer insisted they return to the Congolese section while Laurent insisted they didn't. Security was called to take them back but the young men stood their ground. They had cheated death before; it was unlikely to happen again.

More and more authorities became involved, culminating in a senior official from the Kenyan Government ordering the Protection Officer to send the Banyamulenge to the protection area where they would live for some years.

"We were reasonably safe but we had to watch our back," Gode shares. "It's a nightmare. You're alive but you're dead also. You're numb to everything. You lose trust. You're suspicious of everyone and everything. No matter what good intentions they have you never interact freely with others. People could still attack you on the street, if you have to buy food or cooking oil. No one can protect you."

"I'd made good friends with people in my community but I couldn't maintain the relationships. At school I was isolated. I hung out with the Sudanese students. Classes would finish at two and I had to catch the bus that transported the teachers home. I had nothing else to do. The other kids were at soccer but I had no playmates. We

were very lonely, very stressed and very traumatised.”

“It sucks being an outsider. Everywhere I went I had to work overtime to fit in.”

As the months and years passed in Kakuma, Gode’s life improved somewhat. He made friends with Somali kids and joined in their soccer games, he could sprint from the Somali section to the protection area if ever things looked dangerous.

Gode began to volunteer with a small charitable organisation, taking care of administration and youth work at the same time as translating for the United Nations for Swahili and Kirundi speakers. The pay consisted of meagre tips but he was able to learn new skills. And all the while he kept dreaming of resettlement, never letting the small flame of hope die.

But as the years dragged on his hopes of being resettled wilted. An interview with the UNHCR in 2000 was fruitless. Gode and his Banyamulenge mate were among the few occupants of the protection area who weren’t resettled, almost certainly because of corruption.

A new chance for resettlement

In 2002 a second chance at a new life presented itself. Widespread allegations of corruption in the resettlement process had led to a two-year freeze on placements, followed by a review of all of those who may have been affected.

When the reviewing officers arrived in the camp, Gode was translating for some of the team. As he was wrapping up he politely approached the resettlement officer with the specific request for his friend and himself. The officer knew of his case from the backlog of files they

were investigating.

Late that evening the two nervously hopeful men wrote their stories for the second time. Again they heard nothing.

Two months later an Australian official came to the camp and Gode acted as his translator. “I was taking pictures, filling in forms. At the end I had a chat again. They interviewed me but they had heard it before. I asked if they’d interview my friend and rushed to bring him to the office,” Gode recounts. Following their interviews they received the familiar reply, ‘We’ll look into your cases’.

Soon afterwards the International Organisation for Migration arrived at Kakuma with a long resettlement list publicly posted in the heat and the dust of the camp. The name of every Kirundi or Swahili speaker whose stories Gode had translated was there on the list, everyone except Gode’s and his kinsman.

They were devastated but this turned to elation when they learnt their names did not appear because of concerns for their safety should other Congolese find out they were to be resettled.

They underwent the daunting health checks that the Australian government insisted on and then settled down to wait. In September 2002 Gode was called to the UN office and presented with the magic letter ‘You’ve been approved for resettlement in Australia’.

“I went numb. It was like everything had been frozen. I couldn’t breathe I was so happy. My friend was approved as well. I was overjoyed.

“I wanted to leave now. As soon as we were discovered we could be in serious strife. If the community heard



about our resettlement, the one thing they wanted themselves, I knew there could be trouble.

"The usually long and tiresome walk back to the camp was done in record time. I didn't have much time to prepare, just a few hours. The UN lady was very good to me. She organised transport for me to the camp to make it back in time.

"The whole section came to see me, to see what was happening. Time was against us. The message of our departure had reached the community. My friends from the Congolese and Burundian communities came to visit me at the UN compound," he smiles as he remembers.

Soon Gode and Mikah were travelling to Nairobi under armed escort. "The day came for our flight. Five am. Still then I didn't believe I was coming," Gode shakes his head as he tells the story. "We arrived in Australia late October 2002. It was a huge relief. We were taken to a proper house. No longer would we live in a tent. No longer would we have only one meal per day."

The journey continues in Australia

With a new lease on life more hard work lay ahead. "We were getting acquainted with the system and needed to take responsibility for making something of our lives. Having families left behind pressured us to make sure we transitioned quickly. We did odd jobs and no job was out of the question. I did factory work, laundry, cleaning, everything I could do to survive," Gode recalls.

"In February I went to TAFE doing different courses. I wanted to go to uni but I wasn't ready, I didn't know computers at all. Everything I did I did twice to do it well," he explains. Voluntary work and a graduate diploma in community services lead to paid employment at the local Migrant Resource Centre and eventually to his present youth work position at STARTTS.

As his involvement in study and meaningful work grew so did his involvement in sport.

"Access to activities helped to relive my childhood passion and dreams. I signed up with the Liverpool Robins but didn't last because of a recurring knee injury," Gode says.

"The coaches were supportive; let me keep training for fitness.

Combining community work with his love of sport has helped heal the pain of his youth, the pain of separation from his family and the pain of exclusion.

"It was great to find Australia was a sports-loving nation," he reveals.

"Sports have always been a key part of my life but I never had much access growing up. When I see kids with a similar history it motivates me to work hard. Lots of kids have an ambition to play and participate but there are lots of barriers. Many clubs are resistant to new kids, kids that started with them at a younger age are treated more favourably.

"Some refugee families are very large; they can't

focus their attention on one child so they fall through the cracks. Sport is therapeutic. African kids have lived through a great deal of disadvantage.

"Thus I do what I can to alleviate some of that disadvantage but with conditions. It's a huge motivation for the boys. They're not permitted to participate in sport unless they pay attention to the academic side of life. They see Africans in the A-league and they see that there's hope."

Apart from his work in sport and STARTTS Gode is currently the Head of the small but vibrant Banyamulenge-Tutsi community in Australia. Contact us if you would like to learn more about the community.

The Banyamulenge

Predominantly residing in the South Kivu province of Eastern Congo, the Banyamulenge have been forced to take refuge in neighbouring Rwanda and Burundi. But even in those Tutsi-lead nations they're not safe. According to Peter*, a Banyamulenge elder living in Australia, the Banyamulenge-Tutsi once lived in harmony with the predominantly Bantu fellow inhabitants of the Congo. Peter says problems began when the Belgians left Rwanda and the country was divided leaving many former Tutsi Rwandans on the Congolese side of the border.

The Banyamulenge's ancestors arrived generations ago, in the latter half of the 17th century. Yet many Congolese view both waves of "Tutsi migrants" as rightfully belonging to Rwanda or Burundi. The existing ethnic tensions have been exacerbated by successive Congolese leaders, who have manipulated the resentment for their own power-lusting ends and recent Congolese wars have made things worse.

"Our main problem is our association with the Rwandan government and militia deemed allied to them, lead by (a re-energised) Tutsi. We are Tutsi so they automatically presume we are the same as them," Gode explains.

"Our custom and our language are quite different to theirs, so are our beliefs. We consider ourselves Congolese. When Rwanda comes in the Congo, they [other Congolese] see them as if it were us coming."

Since 1995 a confusing variety of militia and international forces have waged war on these Tutsis. Congolese government soldiers, instead of protecting the Banyamulenge have sometimes joined in their slaughter. More damaging for the ethnic minority group has been the 1996 order expelling 300,000 Banyamulenge from the province of South Kivu and events over the following 12 years have amplified the hatred of the Congolese Tutsi's with consequent increases in vicious attacks.

**Names have been changed to protect the identity of the individuals.*

