



*Shaun Nemorin worked as a field officer for the UNHCR in Africa and Asia, resettling refugees in different countries. He describes his journey to*  
**QUENTIN LAMBERT.**

# My Time at the UNHCR

## **When did you start to work for the UN?**

I began working for UNHCR in 2007 in the Regional Office in Beijing, which was also overseeing Hong Kong and Mongolia. I was posted to different places in Asia and Africa, initially to Nepal, then to the Rohingya crisis in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, and northern Rakhine State in Myanmar; to the northern Mali operation from the border with Burkina Faso; and lastly I worked in the Great Lakes region of Burundi before beginning with STARTTS in 2014.

## **Given the situation in Burundi, we also forget that many refugees find themselves seeking asylum there, too. What was your role?**

Since 2012 there has been a renewed impetus on the part of the international community to establish a durable solution for Congolese refugees languishing in various Great Lakes areas as a result of the war in Eastern Congo. Many have been refugees for well over

a decade and the prospects for return look grim. At the same time, the opportunities for integration in Burundi are extremely limited. Various resettlement countries, spearheaded by the US, agreed to take tens of thousands of Congolese within their yearly resettlement intakes and those who met certain vulnerability criteria.

While most of my roles in UNHCR had been management and coordination of community services programs, my experience in case identification involving specific needs – and perhaps linguistic skills – coupled with a foolish optimism, made me an ideal candidate to set up the resettlement program in Burundi, basically from scratch.

I was tasked with leading a new team, training interpreters, setting up and implementing field mechanisms for referral and logistical structures for people to be interviewed in a fair and confidential manner, and helping set up a child-protection framework. All this within a limited time frame, an insecure environment,



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with scarce resources and large expectations from UNHCR headquarters, the Country Office itself and the resettlement receiving countries.

I would say the work was Dickensian, as it was perhaps the best job I have ever done, yet also the worst in many ways.

#### Can you explain?

Many people do not understand how labour-intensive the resettlement process is, as each applicant goes through a thorough interview to document his or her history of flight. The submission criteria for resettlement were almost exclusively for women at risk and for survivors of violence and torture categories. After interviewing four women for several hours each day, I started to wonder how people can do such evil things to others, yet I was marvelling at the sheer amount of resilience and the desire to keep going even by those who had experienced the most extreme examples of

exploitation and abuse.

There were truly few tangible victories in the best part of the decade I spent with UNHCR. There were moments where you saw a clear win for refugees, when their lives were normalised. I tried to do more than simply bear witness through some of the most challenging moments in their lives. Counselling would often be based more around containment, given that their situations were protracted and unlikely to change in the near to intermediate future.

However, the work in Burundi was massively empowering for me as a humanitarian worker and similarly for those interviewed, as it meant we were actively working towards a realistic solution – something I found spectacularly elusive in other cases.

All of a sudden, however, it was no longer about containing frustration in a hopeless situation, it was about facilitating a process to remove a woman at risk or a separated or unaccompanied minor from an

environment where they were likely to be exploited, often sexually.

Yet it should also be said that, for people in often desperate situations, resettlement becomes a valuable commodity. With this in mind, the integrity of the program is susceptible to fraud and must therefore be managed with extreme nuance and care.

Given that the environment for refugees was one of severe poverty and deprivation, this added to the challenges of not raising expectations about resettlement within the refugee community, many of whom would not be resettled.

Of equal importance was managing affairs with the host community which was not under UNHCR's protection and support yet often had the same needs as refugees in terms of health, education and nutrition. In fact, some of the most difficult conversations I have had were with local Burundians, who were increasingly suffering because of government oppression and had

the severe misfortune of not being refugees, but simply extremely poor. I recall several times where locals would ask me if they too could be resettled. They would present their children with very treatable ailments, in Australia and elsewhere, and ask for help to live where they would have access to adequate food and basic services. To explain to them that such a possibility was only open to refugees frankly rang hollow, and remains something I still have difficulties processing.

Burundi was my last assignment before returning to Australia and beginning work with STARTTS, yet it provided me with time to reflect.

Towards the end of my assignment I had the honour of resettling several hundred people whom I had interviewed and submitted, families that had been accepted to the UK and Belgium. Within this group was a woman who had been gang-raped, children as young as 10 who had been violated by rebels and children who had travelled alone for days to reach safety,



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crossing into Burundi via the Ruzizi River. They had survived crocodiles and persecution while others weren't so lucky, then had to endure years in refugee camps.

I felt it was a fitting end to see them off, a gift of sorts in the belief that in whatever small way, I might have made a difference in the lives of a few. I have a photo with that group which is very dear to me. When I need a reminder on perspective, I have a look at that picture.

**It must have been difficult for small children.**

The context for refugee children differs worldwide, but one phenomenon remains constant: the high numbers of women and children in refugee operations. In the past 10 years there has been an increased interest in child protection as a thematic issue in emergencies, yet resources are often not commensurate to their needs.

In Burundi, the situation was multifaceted. On the one hand there was a protracted caseload of some 40,000 Congolese who had fled the Democratic Republic of Congo wars of 1996-97 and 1998-2003. On the other, the security situation in the Kivu region of Eastern Congo meant that sporadic flare-ups of fighting caused further influxes into Burundi, many of whom were children and some unaccompanied.

This meant that investment was placed to ensure the basic needs of children were covered through safe places to live, learn and play, while also ensuring the children's participation in their protection. It was important for them to have access to legal documentation, while girls and boys with specific needs (psychosocial and physical) received targeted support.

Lastly, to achieve durable solutions for children was a key priority. Local integration and return to Eastern Congo was not feasible, so resettlement became a key protection tool. The UNHCR employed a child-protection team to work alongside me to conduct training for local partners and community members to identify children with specific needs.