

From the Congo to Greece: Profile of a Refugee and his Journey

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Chance Mugeni’s face was expressionless as he recalled the events of the night of October 10, 2019, over two years earlier.

“They handcuffed us, put gags in our mouths and forced us to climb into jeeps,” he recalled. “At the cemetery, there was a hole dug. After they finished throwing the people into the hole, they buried them. They did not kill them. They buried them alive. All except me.”

Mugeni is one of over [2.5 million refugees](#) who since 2015 have been fleeing war, poverty, torture and rape, and making their way to Europe. Many of them have been using Samos, Lesbos and several other Aegean islands as the gateway, making the short but dangerous crossing from Turkey in ramshackle boats. Initially many were permitted to continue to the Greek mainland and eventually on to Western Europe. However, the 2016 agreement between Turkey and the European Union forced asylum seekers to remain on the islands, turning them into virtual prisons. There they would stay—some of them for years—in abhorrent conditions, living in overcrowded, filthy camps that have been compared to [concentration camps](#).

“The life in the camps is a humiliation, a shame,” said Mugeni. “It is like being in a prison. It is worse than torture. It is hell.”

Mugeni, 38, hails from Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where he lived with his wife and three children until he fled to Samos. His father, a general in the army, was assassinated in 2012, and his brother was also later murdered.

“[My father] had worked with [former president of the DRC] Mobutu, and he was poisoned because he belonged to a tribe different from that of [president at the time] Laurent Kabila,” said Mugeni.

Mugeni’s troubles began on March 22, 2019, when four cartons filled with cash disappeared from the office where he worked. The following morning, as he and his nineteen-year-old brother Christian were shopping for food, a white minibus approached. The driver motioned

for Mugeni and Christian to climb in.

"I didn't hesitate, because he mentioned something about work. When I asked about Christian, he said it was no problem; he could come, too," said Mugeni. "There were five men sitting inside. After we got on, they closed the door, blocked the windows and drove for five, ten meters. Then it became hell for me and my little brother. They handcuffed me, began to beat us and demanded to know where the money was. What money? I have never stolen anything in my life."

Mugeni and his brother were taken to a police prison in Kinshasa. The next day the wife of the current president came with the head of the presidential guard.

"She asked me where the money is," said Mugeni. "She told me, 'If the money is not found, you will lose your life. You have nobody who will help you.' After that the torture became really bad. There was nothing I could do."

For the next six months, Mugeni and his brother were subjected to horrific beatings.

"Every day we were tortured. It was hell for us. They pulled my front tooth out with pliers. I was beaten and raped by soldiers. Until today I have blood in my stool," said Mugeni. "One day my brother died. He died at my feet. I still don't know where he is buried."

Finally, on October 10, Mugeni and twelve others were taken to the cemetery. I asked him if he knew he was going to die.

"At that point I was already dead," said Mugeni. "I had no hope of living, with all that I had already experienced."

"When it was my turn, an officer approached and pulled me aside. 'I knew your father in the army,' he said. 'And because of that I'm going to free you. You have to flee. And if you get arrested, you can't tell them about me. Because that would mean my death, as well.'"

During the night, Mugeni and his family managed to make their way to Brazzaville, the capital and largest city of the Republic of Congo (not to be confused with the DRC), located across the Congo river from Kinshasa.

"The smugglers wanted \$30,000 to take all of us to France," Mugeni said. "But we didn't have the money. So we paid for me to go to Turkey by myself. That was the last day I saw my wife and children."

With a fake passport from the Republic of Congo, Mugeni flew to Turkey, and a day later, on November 19, 2019, crossed the Aegean Sea and landed on Samos, where he was staying in the refugee camp.

The living conditions in the camp, which closed in September of 2021 and had a capacity of 650, were appalling. The population reached a high of nearly 8,000 in 2019, and there were

problems associated with overcrowding; violence, lack of hygiene, and little access to medical care.

“It was very bad,” said Mugeni. “There is nobody, nobody who can accept to live in conditions like these. I lived in a tent that I built myself. With the 75 Euros that I got every month, I fed myself. The only people that helped us here were the NGO’s. Without them this would be hell for us.”

Tragedy found Mugeni again six months after his arrival in Samos, when he found out that his sister, who had refused to leave the DRC, was shot and killed. Mugeni believes her death is connected to his case.

“She told me before that there were always uniformed men hanging around her house,” he said. “She didn’t know why.”

A few days later Mugeni lost contact with his wife and children. He has not heard from them in over a year now.

Shortly afterwards, he began seeing a psychiatrist.

“It helped me, but after everything I experienced, I cannot forget. And I have no news of my family. Whenever I eat, I wonder if my kids have something to eat. I am suffering inside, but I am always trying to keep my nerves solid.”

Mugeni was angry at the way refugees are treated by the authorities on Samos, and he was baffled by the behavior of some of the local residents.

“The Greeks are super racist. There is no difference between the blacks and the whites. Only the color. We all have red blood. We all have hearts,” he said. “When we would go to the church, they’d chase us away. They said they’d call the police. In Greece we are worth less than dogs. They think we’re criminals and bandits.”

Mugeni’s asylum case proceeded slowly. On December 18, 2020, he had his interview with the asylum service. Finally, in June, after more than eighteen months on Samos, he received an open card, which meant his geographical restriction to Samos was lifted. He is now on Syros, an island 150 km southeast of Athens, where a friend found him work in a restaurant.

I asked Mugeni about the fact that some Europeans believe refugees come here only to enjoy a higher standard of living.

“I want to send a message to the Europeans who think we are here just for money and work. My financial situation [in the DRC] was very good. I came to Greece, because this is a democracy. I needed international protection. It’s not for work or money. I lived better at home. At home I could support my family and send my kids and siblings to school. Here I am nothing.

“We are not bad people; we are here because we have very serious problems at home. We have a bad government, dishonest leaders who only line their own pockets. We are not here for money.

We don't just need your financial help. We need your moral help. We are traumatized. We need you to support us."

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