The life of an asylum seeker in Hong Kong

Memories of 2007

The real story of a political refugee and the people he encountered on his quest for safety in an Asian metropolis full of surprises and harsh lessons.

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December 2007
Dedication

To my Late Mother Gertrude Alanyo who is the very person for my being ALIVE.

To my Dear wife Abyona Betty,
my son Omaya Declerk
and daughter Amony Derby.
Acknowledgement

My thanks to Ms. Catherine Chan Tsz Ki, Ali Williams, Ms Vivien Harrison, Jenny Wu, Sydey Etima, Mr. John Sloan and Michael Aunario for their consultation and editorial work in the preparation of this manuscript.

I also wish to thank my loving uncle Mr. Albert Joe Ocen, Mr.& Mrs. Joseph Etima for their prayers and contributions and to Olak Oloya David, Tangyie Clement, Oloka David Pila, Sarah Cornish, Ms Yip Hang Fong and Pastor Sam.
My special thanks to all my relatives and friends from JIL church for their constant love and support.
Chapter 1

There is no much fun in the life of an Asylum Seeker. When I decided to leave my country for another, I did not really understand well enough what it takes to be an asylum seeker. Because of many reasons, which I'm not stating here, I decided to leave. Anyway not leave but flee my country in March 2006.

Before I left my country, I had to struggle to get a visa and Air ticket to where I was going. I left my country on a Business Visa to China. I was booked on a Kenya Airway (KQ). It was really my first time to travel by air so I was so eager to get that first experience. I had always wished to become a Pilot right from childhood and all through my school time I was being guided by that dream. So this time though I was not going to be at the Cockpit piloting, I was looking forwards to being airborne.

On that very day at the Airport the take-off time was 8:05pm but unfortunately something went wrong. There was a delay of about 15 minutes and within those 15 minutes I was busy asking the ancestors to join hands and pray together to the Almighty God to let it be “better late than never”. I'm telling you the truth, trust the ancestors, within few minutes the Big Bus was packed like the one we always see in magazines and movies.

After a short while, as if the 15 minutes delay was not bad enough, there was an announcement that the big thing was not going to take off within the next 10 or so minutes because of some minor fault. This did not go well with all the passengers to be. Everybody was sad and quiet but I knew all were trying God's hot line.

Finally, after something like 10 minutes, God said, “Let there be a flight” and there it was! We took off at about 8:30am, the plane taxi-ed very well but after leaving the ground, it appeared as if it could go no further and by that time we were right above the water of Lake Victoria which surrounds the small Airport of Entebbe. I regretted why I boarded this plane in the first place but while I was still thinking about when I last went swimming, the plane started gaining altitude and stabilizing then I comforted myself by saying, Yes-this is the kind of experience which are got only by those who travel by Air. It's so scaring but worthwhile taking.

It took about 45 minutes to land at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. While airborne, everything down looked like those we see in Tom & Jerry's World, you may think the world belongs to them, buildings, roads even human beings looked so tiny, and should one come down and tell you that you were looking like a bottle, you would take it for an abuse yet it's very true.

At JK Airport, we had to wait for about 12 hours. It was a long wait but to me it was refreshing in a sense that this was where I used to come for my practical while doing my course of IATA-FIATA (Air Cargo Operation).

The flight to this place was so pleasant though my imagination was still so high since I was not yet close to my final destination-China. While we were buying time in JK, I met a guy who had ever lived in Uganda and after learning that I was from Uganda, he became so friendly and involved me into some kind of story telling which I did, he had some two lovely kids of which he was proud that he got them while in Uganda.

After changing the aircraft, at exactly 10:00pm, we took off for Bangkok-Thailand the next
stopover. All started well, we were given the Ten Commandments of the flight like “thy shall use the bag under the seat ” etc. The crew members were really excellent, we were being updated on each and everything, there was one particularly service man who looked more of a Chinese, he was serving everybody with a real big smile, I remember asking for more drinks which I did not need just because he was so friendly but nevertheless the rest were equally good.

The flight was nice in a sense that, I could not see how far we were from the ground because from what the pilot kept telling us, it appeared we were close to Heaven. Anyhow, that did not bother me much. I could sleep, wake up again repeatedly but while awake, I kept thinking about the foreign land I'm heading to. I remember when I told one of my friends before leaving that I was going to China, he told me,” Be ready to eat rice”.

It's always not easy to eat rice with the hands the African way, at least I could use a spoon or a fork this made me draw up a plan of carrying at least one along which I later forgot. I was afraid of the Chinese pair of sticks-Chop Sticks. I remember one time while watching Bruce Lee's movie, he went to some Restaurant to fight and everybody there in was having this pair of sticks. I decided, if there are no spoon or fork in China, then I'm going to try and use their sticks if not then the African way-my hands.

Another thing that bothered me much was about leaving my people behind especially my wife Betty- Mama Declerk, my son Declerk and little daughter Derby, but I asked God to take over from where I had left. While all these thoughts were bogging my mind, we were approaching our second stopover - Bangkok.

We reached Thailand in the morning the following day and we were not allowed to get out of the aircraft unlike in Nairobi-Kenya. For about 45 minutes we were in Bangkok and when we took off, after flying for 2-3 hours, we were in Hong Kong International Airport. We reached around lunchtime.

I had planned to use a ferry from Hong Kong to China but while at the Airport, we had to report to immigration department. Since I had a business visa, I had dressed like one, there was no doubt I wasn't one the way I was, with my Rolling Bag and a small hand Bag assumingly for CASH. The Immigration Officer asked me how much cash I was carrying. I told him I was going mainly for Business survey, should I find what I need, I would immediately ask my Banks to transfer money. He immediately did the most needful in order not to delay my business. He turned over the pages of my passport … and … pam! He told me I was allowed to stay in Hong Kong for 30 days. For me my target was to get into the next available Ferry to China that very day. When I left the immigration department, I saw a black fellow like one from my country. I went to him and asked him whether it was his first time in this place.

And he told me he is a regular businessman to Hong Kong, I felt like I was in Kalahari Desert and had just gotten an oasis. He told me his name was Boa and immediately I looked down at his legs whether he was the famous Footballer from Togo but his legs did not tell me anything to do with football, I then asked him where he comes from he told me Togo. I relaxed because I knew most professional footballers are kind and good people so I guessed I was in good hands.

Actually his English was not good, but I knew even Thiery Henry does not speak good English but still he plays well and he is important. I was about to ask him when he was going to play the next
match when he told me he is just a businessman most of the time he is in China. I asked him where I could find a cheap place to sleep should I fail to proceed to China. He told me” Big Bro don’t worry, meaning don't worry, we shall go together and I show you where you can get a cheap accommodation. But earlier on while still on flight, there was a Chinese gentleman who boarded from JK, we had become friends. I had asked him similar question, where I could get a cheap place. He had drawn some pictures on a piece of paper to mean a name of a place. I had kept the piece of paper but after meeting this son of a man from Africa, I never look at it again. As we were getting out of the Airport in a double Decker bus, I saw a big sign stating:

**THIS IS HONG KONG, KEEP HONG KONG CLEAN**

It was not “WELCOME TO HONG KONG” like elsewhere around the world. Anyway I did not mind so much about that.

After a long ride from the Airport, everywhere we were passing seems to look the same, punctuated with tall buildings like the three we are proud of in my country, Uganda House, Crested Tower, and Telecommunication House. This Hong Kong seems to be full of such tall buildings some are even much taller.

The streets were full of double Decker Buses, which are not commonly seen in my country, there are all families of cars on these streets. We finally came to some place where my new friend said,’ We are getting out here’. Chinese were all over this place, we headed to some tall building Called Chung King Manson where this guy was well known to quite a number of people, even the local people, the Chinese.

Chung King Manson was the place where I first sighted Black people and they were quite many. People were moving up and down as if they had lost their ways, but later on I learn that this is one of the most busy business centers in Hong Kong. We then joined a long line of people going into the Lift. We went up to 15 Floor of Block A, where I booked into one of the rooms but my new friend proceeded to his room where I did not know.
Chapter 2

It was until I got out of the bathroom preparing to go to bed and into deep sleep when I realized that I was supposed to be traveling to China not sleeping in Hong Kong. But my conscious ordered me to leave everything for tomorrow and sleep, I did exactly that. It must have been due to the long hours journey feeling that I was finally out of danger that I slept like a baby who got a warm bath from the mother before being laid to sleep.

I woke up the following morning and realized that indeed I had left my country and out of the most eminent danger that I was in. I then said, 'Surely God does not close both the door and the window at the same time, when one is closed, the other is opened'. I then started asking myself questions and giving their answers as well. I remember asking four important questions:

1) Why did I flee my country?
2) Why am I in here not elsewhere?
3) What do I need?
4) What am I supposed to do?

After going through the above questions over and over pondering over their answers, I concluded that this could as well be my destination. It took me some few days to recall and assemble all the pieces together before getting into public life in Hong Kong. First thing first, I said - I must find out where the offices of the UNHCR are. I thought of declaring myself to them asking for Political asylum which was my prime target before fleeing my country. The Guest Room was also becoming expensive each day yet whatever I was spending was not coming back, that alone in itself gave me more courage to act before it's late.

It was on 22 March 2006 after gathering the entire necessary document to support my claim that I headed for the UNHCR offices in Jordan. I had already got the proper location of the place a day before, so this time I just walked straight to the place and ascended up to 9th Floor of the building. At the entrance, there were two guards who looked friendly, I went through a brief body search and I was ushered into some small room next to the main entrance.

Here was one gentleman putting on a similar uniform to those at the entrance, this guy was a little bit different from the former, he was wearing a mean face, which appeared to be telling is guest “Don't try!!” He asked me whether I had come to register, I did not know what the registration was about but I just assumed it was like that in Boarding Schools-(Fresher Registration), so I just said “YES”. Immediately he gave me a small piece of paper bearing some number, I don't remember but I think it was No.22. He then told me to wait inside the waiting room that my number will be called and I go in.

Thank God this UNHCR guys are really organized. Inside the waiting room, there were very many people who seem to have come from all walks of life; the majorities were just seated chatting to one another not even bothered with what was on the wall. The walls were covered with postures giving detail information on Asylum Seekers and Refugee. I decided not to sit down but to stand and read all the important information before being called in. In fact I got so interested in what I was reading that I was wishing not to be called in yet, I specifically paid much attention to the five conditions.
that one must meet in order to be granted status as a Refugee.

1. The Claimant must be outside his /her country of origin and not be willing to return.
2. They must have well-founded fear of persecution
3. The persecution must be for reason of:
   - race
   - religion.
   - nationality.
   - member of a particular social group
   - or political opinion
4. The state must be unable or unwilling protect this person.

After reading the five points, I got enough courage to present my case before the officer concerned because I just confirmed that I have fulfilled all the conditions. As I was still reading on, my number was called out; I went inside the room directly opposite the Registration Room. I came face to face with a young looking lady. I guessed she was between 25 and 30 years old.

She put on a smiling face, but this changed later when we got down to business, she became tough and sympathetic. She asked me three basic questions.

1. Have you ever been tortured?
2. Have you ever been Raped?
3. Have you ever been beaten?

These three questions required the answer of YES or NO. As I give the answers she was busy pressing the keyboard of her computer, she was so fast as if she was the one who placed the buttons into their rightful places. I gave her a brief account of my case while she was busy positioning her small camera-web cum mounted on top of her computer, I thought, very soon she might ask me for a catwalk, but fortunately enough, she asked me only to take my passport photo for their file.

I said within my heart that since she said for their file, am not going to give her the big smile I had planned to, maybe if it were for my file. She then printed out her work and gave me the original copy containing the picture she had just taken. She was good enough to explain everything to me before I left the room.
She said, 'This is our Temporarily Certificate for you'. This acknowledges that you are a person of concern to us, while your case is being examined.

That you have registered with us as an asylum seeker, however, this paper is not recognized by the Hong Kong government, you may still be arrested by the immigration police for over staying your visa but even if that happened, we shall still come and interview you from the Shell. You must come back here on 26th /June/2006, she then photo copied my Passport and gave it back to me. As I was about to leave, she gave me two pieces of paper containing contact addresses of some two Non-governmental organizations, Inner City Ministry (ICM) and Christian Action all situated on same building but different floors. I got out of the office with the piece of paper in my hand not knowing what next. Three months to go! What will I eat and where will I be sleeping? These questions teased me until I reached my room.
Chapter 3

It was early morning of the day after my registration with UNHCR that I decided to look for the offices of the two organizations whose contacts I received from UNHCR. Finding these two places was not really so hard as they were on the same building I was sleeping, Chung King Manson. ICM is situated on the 4th Floor Block E while Christian Action is on 16th Floor of the same building. I reached Inner City Ministry first.

When I entered inside, there were very many people and what puzzled me most was that there were many black people, women and children. This made me feel a little bit at home. The sitting arrangement gave an impression of a conference room, and the people seated inside appeared to be waiting for the guest of Honor to come any moment and deliver his message. All of a sudden a gentleman emerged from an adjacent room and said, “Let’s pray!” He led us into a short prayer and asked if there were new faces in the room. Stand up and say your names and where you come from. Later on I learn that this gentleman is indeed Pastor Sam one of the big shorts in ICM. I was one of those who stood up and pronounced their names, countries of origin loud and clear.

Worship time at ICM

Praying for the food
After that there was a procession of worship by singing God's praise for about 30 minutes. The Pastor then started preaching, telling the people how God loves them, he talked about Jesus Christ the son of the great creator with precision as though he was one of the twelve disciples that were with Jesus, this made me confirm indeed this guy was a Pastor. When he was concluding, he said, “Let’s pray now for the food that we are about to have and also for those who have prepared it”. At this point, everybody in the room appeared to be glad to for having come around.

The prayer to ask God to bless the food was not so long, soon packets containing food started arriving from the adjacent room and they were being distributed randomly without asking for any payment. After everybody had got a packet, and we were beginning to eat then Pastor came to me and asked, ”When did you come to Hong Kong?” I answered, ”Few days ago.”

We then had a little discussion afterwards. In fact he was so friendly and welcoming. Some other guys also came to me later asking how my President Iddi Amin Dada is doing, in fact, many of them thought Amin was still the President of the Republic of Uganda and from the way they were talking, they wanted him to still be the president only that they got disappointed when I told them he was no longer the President, that he was overthrown in 1979 and in fact he has already died in exile in Saudi Arabia. I interrupted them by asking each one of them where they are coming from and how long they have been in Hong Kong.

Most of them were not willing to say how long they have been around. Out of the people I talked to especially from Africa, the greater percentage comes from West Africa namely, Ghana, Nigeria, Togo and Guinea Bissau, Some few were from Cameroon. Very few from East Africa but again there were quite a number from Congo Kinshasa and Congo Brazzaville all these in the Central Republic of Africa. Apart from Africa, most of these guys were from South Asia Countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, Afghanistan and Pakistan. When I realized that guys were not willing to make known how long they have been around, I cautioned myself that “I'm still a new kid on the block” so I should not ask so many questions, I then humbled myself like an Alter-Boy and started doing a lot of listening than talking.
According to my findings that time, I concluded this was a home for the needy especially those who have run away or fled their country (Asylum Seekers). Food here was free but one has to know that the Almighty God is the provider. I remember praying to God to bless those who prepared and served the food by then I had not known who pays for it. While we were still talking over the delicious food, some people were already talking about my next place of visit, Christian Action.

I then asked the guy seated next to me whether he would be going to Christian Action also and he said yes. We then went to the lift but instead of going straight up, we first went down then up to 16F and that was Christian Action.

*Lunchtime at Christian Action*

This guy led me in with much ease, he was talking to everybody there as though they were his family members and as if he had just gone out for a short walk and just returned. I was too busy feeling good because my tour guide seems to know everybody and everything that was taking place there. To some few guys who wanted to know me, he said, “This is another Buganda”. I wondered because Buganda is a region in my country Uganda. Could there be another country, or person called Buganda? I thought to myself.

The guy who was nearest to me asked, “Buganda, how is Iddi Amin and Uganda?” I then concluded that Buganda must be a person from Uganda and that means there must be another Buganda or Ugandan around. I just said Uganda is ok ignoring Iddi Amin. I interacted with some few guys here and there. I was also introduced to the Registration Officer who demanded for a copy of the letter from UNHCR.

*Children class at Christian Action*
He did not ask me a lot of questions when I gave him the letter. He punched on the buttons on his computer, took the photocopy of the letter and handed the original back to me. He then asked me whether I had got some place to stay. I told him everything but at the end of it all he told me I was free to come for Breakfast every morning from Monday to Friday and Dinner every evening but that Sunday the place is always closed.

At that time, I started filling in the “Refugee Crosswords Puzzle”:

Breakfast = Christian Action
Lunch = ICM
Dinner = Christian Action from Monday to Friday.

What about Saturday? Only Christian Action is opened for one meal while ICM is closed. Now the big question was Sunday, both Christian Action and ICM are closed!! That means no Breakfast, no Lunch and no Dinner. When I realized that out of seven days only one day is not catered for, I remember the Bible when Jesus Christ said,” Man does not live on food/bread alone”, that means one-day starvation won’t harm me. I calculated, three months to go before returning to UNHCR office, how many days I will have to go without food. One month-four Sundays, three months-twelve Sundays. That means twelve days out of Ninety days.

At least that was not so bad for someone who is not working in a foreign land. The major problem now was accommodation. The Guest House was becoming expensive each day. The few days I have been there, I have been paying it through the noise. It then dawned to me that God always creates a way where there seems to be no way. While I was still thinking about all this, one guy who was using one of the computers asked me whether I wanted to surf of which I said, yes. I asked him whether it was free of charge, he just nodded back and I got down to business. That day everything started and ended well up to the time I retired to my room. In fact I did not know how the day went.

From that day it was a routine going to the two places but each day that I went there I met new faces and discovered a lot of new things. I also discover that one has to be a little wit to live in such a community. I then started considering the people I meet individually and I discovered a lot of interesting things. By asking many questions, I got many answers . In fact, just forgive me for using the word interviewed, I interviewed these guys (Asylum Seekers) and refugees and ended up discovering what the life of Asylum Seeker is all about. I discovered that many people are asylum seekers who have genuine cases do not know how to present their cases before the UNHCR and also that many claimants have no cases at all.

There is another group of people who approach the office of UNHCR to somehow legalize or extend their stay in Hong Kong while they do what they are supposed to do-Business. In fact after gathering a lot of information from these people, I realized how hard it's for the UNHCR to handle and sort out the genuine asylum Seekers from the large group. Actually very many genuine Asylum Seekers are suffering at the expense of these “Lips Stick Asylum Seekers”.
Chapter 4

There is also Band wagon mentality, people come looking for greener pasture and end up in the office of UNHCR seeking asylum just because their friends who are already here advised them to do so. As per my findings, I got to know that according to the UNHCR sources, in June 2006 the total number of Asylum Seekers applicants stood at 1613. Meanwhile the current number of recognized refugees waiting to be resettled is 144. The average number of new arrivals since January 2006 was 150 asylum seekers per month. Asylum seekers and refugees originate from over 40 countries in Asia and Africa.

-58% from South Asia
-30% from South West Africa,
-11% Central-East Africa
-1% others.

Most of the Asylum Seekers from Asia are from Nepal followed by Pakistan while from Africa, Ghana takes the lead but funny enough no person from Ghana has been given Refugee status in Hong Kong. I have wondered about this but after taking to some of the fellows from there, I realized that most of them did not know why they were seeking asylum.

The majority if not all came to Hong Kong to do some sort of Business but eventually end up registering as Asylum Seekers. Some of them do not know who an Asylum Seeker is. I told some few of them after studying their cases that if I were UNHCR I would also not give them status, you know what? they told me ,their major intention is to stay longer in Hong Kong and raise at least some reasonable amount of money before going back, so in other words, they are more at home when the UNHCR takes longer to handle their cases or give them interviews. They prefer “changing papers” and when their cases are rejected, they go for appeal so that more time is granted. One guy told me” Brada, me I don't care, life is not easyzio, if I can only get two years here, I will go back to my country and eat fofo with my wife”. Anyhow, this is not the case with Ghana only but most African countries.

Most people from Nepal do not know why they are here although they have a lot of problems back home, they are quite reserved. And the many friends have attracted most of them here and relatives who are Hong Kong ID holders this also applies to guys from India and Pakistan, some of them are involved in petty businesses here and there and this makes them quite comfortable.

I also found out that the guys from Pakistan are more troublesome, they like quarreling among themselves unlike those from India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh but I personally have good friends from all these places even Pakistan.

I also gathered that the Hong Kong government has not signed the Geneva 1951 Refugee Convention and has not enacted any legislation to protect Asylum Seekers. They are often treated as illegal immigrants or over stayers by the authorities and are subjected to harsh penalties, detention and removal under immigration law. They are illegal immigrants or over stayers artificially created by the authorities by denying them the visa extension when their status are being determined by UNHCR and or the immigration Department.

Asylum Seekers in Hong Kong are never free and secure. Every now and then they are expectant of the eminent arrest and detention by the immigration Police for over staying. Very many of them are
in Tsun Mun Detention Center and very many have already been there and set free after signing CAT-Convention against Torture. I talked to some of the graduates from the University of Understanding, a phrase favorably used in Uganda to mean a detention center or prison and according to them, Hong Kong immigration police are more humane than the UNHCR Hong Kong.

They do agree that, in order not to have any problem with them; one has to be sincere and cooperate. They said the Center is divided into three different Rooms. Actually, they reminded me of my old days in Christ The King Demonstration School, where I attended my elementary school when we used to speak broken English while learning English language.

When it came to Words Comparison like the word “BAD”, everyone would rush for BAD, BADDER, BADDDEST. According to these guys, the Center has three Rooms from Bad to Baddest.

5A……………..Bad.
5B……………...Badder.
5C………………Baddest.

It’s believed that guys from 5C are so unruly with bad characters compared to 5B composed of guys with moderate behaviors.

When I asked them why some people take more than 48days inside there, they told me that some guys have more complicated cases other than overstay. But most of them agree to the fact that the individual case officer is the main determinant of the duration one takes inside. Another guy told me, “Hong Kong Police are the best.” He said while in detention, one is given everything except freedom. He said, about food, the food inside Detention Center is better than outside, that before going to bed; every day there is a big cup of milk waiting-he really misses the center.

I also learn that UNHCR has been involved with refugee work in Hong Kong since the Vietnamese refugee period, and since then has maintained a sub-office in Hong Kong to provide Refugee Status determination, screening in the absence of the government procedure.

One day I went to a Church to pray and after the service I shared my problem with the Pastor who advised me to try and tell my problem about accommodation to Social Welfare Department. On 17th April 2006 I walked to the offices of Social Welfare Department in Yau Ma Tei because I could longer afford the Guest House rent.

I went to the 4th Floor where their offices are located some Kind lady called Ms Li attended to me, in fact God should always bless her, she was one of the kind people you find around the world. First and fore most she gave me her time and real listened to me attentively and when I was through with my story, she asked me some few questions here and there but I could tell from her face that she was so concerned. She demanded for my document, and fortunately enough, I had carried them along.

After photo copying them, she asked me to give her two hours. When I went back after two hours had elapsed, she said,” In fact, you have been given a place in our shelter, you have been assigned Mr. Yau Lau Tim as your case/welfare officer because he speaks English and the guys who are going to stay with you are only the local Chinese and they don't speak English”. She went ahead and asked;” Can I introduced you to him now?” he will be the one to take you later at 6.00pm to the shelter. I said,” Yes”.
She then took me to Mr. Lau Tim who was equally welcoming and friendly. He was a tall middle age man who looked more of a school Headmaster with his short mustache. After the introduction, he said I should come back at 6.00pm because that is the time the shelter will be opened.

At 5.45pm I was ready there waiting, he told me to wait a bit and indeed he kept his words, at 6.00pm we took off for the shelter, it was a walking distance of about 600m from Mr. Lau’s office. While we walked, I was a bit inquisitive to know where I was being taken, eventually, we reached to a Building which looked like a Boarding School in my country, I looked up and saw all the windows were opened and light beaming out from each of them like that of a public Bus moving at night with all the lights on. There were some writings on the wall but I could not read them all but I managed to read two words, “STREET SLEEPERS”. That did not bother me much that time because I knew I was getting a new home away from home now.

We walked up some two stair cases and we came face to face with a man who was introduced to me as Mr. Juju or Mujo the in charge of the place/shelter. Mr. Lau then produced some envelope from his bag on which my names were well written and handed it to him. While this guy was going through the letter, I was busy scanning the surrounding -immediately it came to my knowledge that this was like a Senior Secondary school like those in my country, this must be a Dormitory!!! I estimated the number of students to be about 60.

But before long when I looked at the students themselves, I concluded that this must be a school for “MATURE” students. Some few were below 35 years old but majority were above 40. I decided to remain an “Enjuka” in my country an Enjuka is a school fresher. At this point I recalled how we used to teased the fresher and when I looked at these supposed to be my new roommates, I realized they were all Chinese as Madam Li told me before. Immediately, I remembered “BRUCE LEE”.

I said to myself,“ if these guys are to tease me then there is going to be a lot of Karate or Kung Fu “ but thank God I had done some elementary training in Kung Fu while still in Secondary School. So I was sure of displaying some tactics should they attack, I was going to try whatever I could but I will make sure I shout the African way, I mean louder than Bruce Lee to scare them and since their fellow Chinese man brought me in, they may think I’m from Bruce Lee's Training School. Two minutes later, I was given a Blanket, & Bed Sheet. This Dormitory was a little bit better that those in my country. On top of each bed, there was a fan, and in the room there is a 26" TV Microwave and Water Heater. The washroom is very tidy. I concluded this is my “HOME AWAY FROM HOME”.

Roommates in the shelter
Another problem that I encountered in the Shelter was that of “Bed Bugs”. Although this place is well maintained, these insects infest it. This became a big problem to me in a sense that it was not easy to eradicate them. The first time I saw one on my bed, it wasn’t alarming because I was confident to deal with it, it was not a big task to kill one insect. I just picked it up and just divided it into two. But later on, it appeared that that one was just a commander, some more started to emerge from their hidings. Every other day I would see one or two more. I then decided to carry out a general operation on and around my bed. To my surprise, these guys were very many only that they had the characteristics of the Lord Resistance Army-LRA back in my country.

They were very good in mobility and also good at hiding. The LRA would come and attack a place in Northern Uganda and within no time, they are back in Sudan or DRC-Congo while the government forces UPDF-Uganda People Defense Forces are busy looking for them around the scene of the attack. I remember the President one time admitting that the rebels beat them –UPDF in mobility, that the government did not have proper road systems in those places as if the LRA were using trucks or Cargo planes.

The LRA knows when to attack and when to run away and it is this same tactics that the Bed Bugs are applying. One can never see them anywhere around when the lights are on, but immediately lights are out, they are everywhere and when you turn on lights again, you only see their hind limbs, taking cover as if they were never there. When they became too many for my blood, I decided to spend some little coins on insecticide in order to eliminate these characters.

But again this insecticide did nothing to them, they were quite resistant. In fact Bed Bugs are quite different from other insects. It’s not easy to do away with them. When I realized that these guys were really in my territory, regrouping and attacking over and over again and were not about to leave me in peace, I decided to use the weapon of mass Destruction without seeking for permission from the UN Security Council. That day, I collected all my Bedding equipment like, bed sheets, blanket etc. AND by then the water in the Heater had reached its boiling point.

I dipped everything one by one into the hot water, and guess what!? All the guys were lying upside down. This weapon of mass destruction really works. In fact the UN Security Council should put in place a law that allows all nations to acquire one. Now my country-Bed is so peaceful, no more rebel activities.

Another problem that I had to live with in the Shelter is that of my roommates’ mentalities. Dwelling in the shelter means a lot to me. The fact that I live with Chinese, means bearing with different cultures and traditions. These guys are really friendly, except that somehow my culture conflicts with theirs. I specifically would like to mention behaviors that really irritated me right from day one, I thought it would come to an end but I wasn’t right. This is about spitting anyhow.

Back home in my country Uganda, while I was a little child, I remember when my parents used to be so strict on such kind of behaviors of coughing and spitting carelessly especially in public. My grandmother, Madam Everina Ayat Oballim of Patiko Pabwo had very many ways of administering different kind of punishments for such offences. She would use a knife to pitch you. She would ask, who taught you that? Why did you do it? And then she would tip…tip…tip with the
tip of the knife.

My friend, I tell you when you get such kind of treatment, you can never repeat such an act whether accidentally or not. At times she would deny the victim a meal and missing a meal was really a big deal. Children were never allowed to have money like nowadays, even if you had one, it was supposed to be kept by an adult. There were no McDonald like we see around town these days and eating from the neighbor’s place was out of question. That means missing a meal was a real big punishment. We grew up knowing that it was bad manners to just do such a thing in public especially when someone has something to bite/eat.

These guys here do not give a damn about where and when they do it. At times I wonder when they are rinsing their mouths in the morning whether they are competing to see who gives the loudest sound-noise. You may think it was in the school syllabus right from Kindergarten that,” the louder you are, the more clean your mouth is.” In most cases I felt like telling them to stop it, but it appears quite normal with all the others and since I’m a new kid on the block, I realized it’s important not to interfere with people peace and decided to live with it.
Christian Action has got quite a lot of activities for the Asylum Seekers and Refugee. These activities range from sports events like Basketball and Football to Outings. These activities keep them physically fit and relax their mind a little. Many different classes are conducted in this center for both Children and Adults this is from Monday to Saturday.

The most common of all is the language class. The fact that these people come from different countries, means they speak different languages and in order to narrow the language barrier which is the major hindrance to communication, these people are so much willing to take up these lessons which includes, English Class, French Class, and Cantonese Class. I personally got interested in the Cantonese Class. This is mainly because it’s the native language here and I have to interact with the common people as well.

My first day in Cantonese class was so interesting in a sense that some of the words sound exactly like those in my own language-Acholi although they mean different thing.

The first lesson was about “Numbers” - (1-10).

The First number one was YAT.

Yat in my language is MEDICINE.

When the teacher said Yat, I thought we were about to start up something on Medicine, I imagined myself in a white Overall like a Doctor on a Ward Round with stethoscope over my neck, but before long we were made to know that yat is just the Number ONE and Yii is two and so forth. As we progress, I started laughing to myself and the teacher wondered what was wrong with me and she asked, anything wrong? I said, nothing! But it was the words YAT PA and YAT CIN amusing me.

Yat Pa is –One hundred (100).
Yat Cin is—One Thousand (1000).

In my Luo language/Acholi, Yat Pa is a medicine to relieve stress and over-thinking and Yat Cin is medicine for treating stomach or intestine.

I was amused and I thought this was not only study about medicine but Human Medicine, and that in the next few weeks we might be going for practical in the theater-this thought made me forgot the presence of the rest of the students around me and looked at the task that lies ahead. I just laughed…and laughed…. and laughed. I then had to explain to the teacher-class it was Yat Pa and Yat Cin that were killing me with laughter. Everybody then burst into prolonged laughter…

There are also Computer classes for both intermediate and advanced, infact, I bet all the Asylum Seekers and Refugee can press the Computer Keyboard now. Outing is one of the activities carried by Christian Action. In what appears to be making these desperate people forget their problems, Christian Action once in a while takes us out especially for Out Door games and Beaches. Outing is the word.

I remember vividly well that there was a note on the Notice Board that people should register their name for a trip to Clear Water Bay Beach. But for a period of about a week, some people never bothered to send in their names including myself but when the time came for going, everybody
The life of an asylum seekers in Hong Kong - 18

wanted to go yet not all registered. There was a small commotion where the Bus was parked. Only those whose names are on the list should enter the bus, said Shamila Gurung, the Head Of Christian Action, Chung King Mansions Service Center. I will read the names, she said.

![Inside the bus ready to go 1](image)

But by the time she started reading the names, the bus was already full and everybody was claiming to have registered. Madam Shamila Gurung had no option but to hire the second bus. Everybody in the bus was so happy and excited as if they didn’t have any problem at all. All of them appeared as if their cases had already been accepted by UNHCR and they were being relocated to a third country. As we were approaching the Beach we could tell the beauty of the beach from a distance, the panorama of the surrounding place gave an impression of a place of only well to do people, however we were not that but we were finally there. We could see the beauty of the Blue water, wide spread welcoming sea sand, Boats and locomotive Ferry(s) dotted on water here and there.

When we got to final destination, there were so many people mainly of Asian origin and some few white people. We got ourselves stationed in one corner of the Beach and mainly students who were equally eager to go swimming occupied this particular site. As soon as these students realized that this group of people including Blacks were also about to enter the water, some of them approached us and asked if we could allow them to swim first and we get into the water-sea later.

We were so bitter with these guys, we told them if they were not ready to swim with us, then they could as well find another sea, after all in the sea or oceans there are different kind of fish-Black or White. After a while the students swallowed their pride and entered the water where different kind of people were already swimming. In fact, later on, these fish finally enjoyed swimming together with other spices. We mingled with them to an extent that they asked when we would be back again. They even gave us their SWIMMING tubes to use-we became friends. I was happy because they got the point that “BLACK OR WHITE IT DOESN’T MATTER.”
There is also some gambling in this place; these guys-roommates operate this Mini Casino from Monday to Sunday. From what I gathered, there are various kinds of games including cards games. As in many other casinos, heavy smoking and a lot of noise also characterize this one. It became a problem to me in a sense that these Las Vegas guys have no set time for closing, the casino operates throughout the night and this is a very big disturbance to non-gamblers. In fact, I was bothered when I had just come but later on I said, “it doesn’t matter how hard you beat a Leopard, its colors can never change.”

And for sure, if these guys had a Roulette Table, they would be having more cash than their counterparts from Macau or Los Angeles.

There is one thing that made my life in Hong Kong a little bit easy. My strong religious conviction. While I was yet a child, I was brought up in a Christian family with The Roman Catholic background. I went to Missionary Primary Schools around my village. Mary Immaculate Primary School and Christ The King Demonstration School respectively. All the other schools around were

*Clearwater Bay beach*

*The casino inside the shelter*
also missionary schools. In fact, I’m so proud to say my people are God fearing and strong believers and I think this is due to the presence of many Italian Missionaries Priests in this part of the country.

In these schools, CRS (Christian Religious Studies) is the major subject and church attendance on Sunday is a must. The punishment associated with missing Sunday services includes hard labor like cleaning the school toilets for a period of more than two days and slashing Lajanawara (tall elephant grass).

I grew up knowing Jesus Christ as my Lord and personal savior. But that time it was like a routine exercise so it did not ring much of a bell to me. The words “My Lord and Personal Savior” did not mean much to me then, but when I was about 12 years old, I started understanding the Bible. When I got married, I knew I would bring up my family the same way I was brought up. I remember the time when we could not eat or go to bed without saying some prayers.

But all that changed as I was growing up, I was still a believer but no longer giving it much time. It became worse when I jumped onto the wagon of politics; I did not have enough time for my God. I would skip many Sundays without attending to any service, but thank God I had introduced my wife and the two children to my church. Every Sunday morning I would ask my wife to take the children to pray but she would insist I go with them but I would give her all the excuses. But I later realized that I was backsliding on my God.

So when I came to Hong Kong, it was a blessing in disguise, I met very many non-believers and also many believers and as I said before, everyday there is a lunchtime service that I got used to. I also went to the nearby church St. Andrew’s Church in Tsim Sha Tsui and later on I was introduced to JIL International Center in Shek Kip Mei (JIL = Jesus is Lord).

I then realized and confirmed that God creates a way where there seems to be none. I reflected on my past life before coming to Hong Kong, opened the Bible and Read over and over again Psalm 30:1-3. I went to Psalm 40:9-17, I said to myself that I shall never seal my lips again.

Discipleship at JIL

Although the three months given to me by the UNHCR appeared to be so long, I hardly realized how it went by. On 26th June 2006 as I was told by the UNHCR to report back, I did exactly that and for sure I was expecting to be given an interview, but to my dismay I was given some forms to fill and hand them back. I was led into some small room by one of the guards, there inside was this
lady who handed me the forms and said I should not carry them outside that room.

That I should fill them from there and when am through I should alert the guard. But while I was filling in the forms, I realized that the information they require was the same I had written down for them three months ago. Anyway, I did not mind about that, I guessed it was their office procedure; I did exactly what they required out of me. In fact I had ample time to recall what I might have forgotten the first time.

When I was done, I alerted the guard who in turn alerted the lady. She came and collected the forms and handed me a similar Certificate like the one I was previously given except that the dates were different. This one had a lifetime of only one and half month, I was supposed to report back on 16th August. When I read through the letter and considering what I have gone through and was still going though, I felt some pain rile through me from head to toes, but I realized that I have already handed my case to them and they have their own criteria. I swallowed and walked back To Chung King Mansion and wrote a letter to UNHCR updating them on my status/ life as an Asylum Seeker in Hong Kong. I also had to take a copy of their letter to Social Welfare Department. My case officer Madam Yip Hang Fong is a very nice lady; she has been treating me like a mother, in fact, whoever placed her in that office made no mistakes.

On 16th August, I was back at the UNHCR office for the third time; I was optimistic that I was getting an appointment for an interview this time round especially after learning from some other Asylum Seekers who had already been interviewed that some people are interviewed between four and six months. But guess what?? I was again asked to go back on 20th September. This time I took it easy, I assumed that these guys must be evaluating my case; at least they need some time to come up with their findings. I then decided to write a letter requesting for an interview of which I did not get any reply. I went back on 20th September as was scheduled and the same lady just handed me the same kind of letter. I really got disturbed and asked the lady if I could talk to her about the Interview but she told me She does not make decision on interview her work is to dish out those papers. I then requested her if I could talk to the one that make decision. She told me to sit and wait in the waiting Room. After about 15 minutes, I was called inside the room and the same lady told me that they have already marked my case, that my next visit I will be given an appointment date for interview and my next visit was to be on 15th November. But you know what!?, On 15th November, I entered in and there was the same lady who told me about my interview. She asked me to give my paper/certificate. I did that. She bends over a heap of letters and came out with mine and handed it over to me, I wanted so much to know the interview date.

I looked at the date first and noticed that in fact there was no interview yet. I counted on my fingers from March to December-NINE months without any interview. I was so hurt that I could not say a word, within that moment, I immediately reflected on all the problems I escaped from back home, in fact that morning I was reading a magazine “REFUGEES - No Longer Forgotten” 2005 by UNHCR and right in the middle pages, the sad pictures of my own people from Northern Uganda, my birth place were covering the pages with hundreds of grass-huts and tents. This is my real home. These IDP (Internally Displaced People) camp photos were in the middle of the magazine and I felt like crying, but I consoled myself that,” Big Boys Don’t Cry.” I had all the sad memories back and I failed to say a word, I walked away, but I know God creates a way where there seems to be none, maybe one day one time their grass huts will turn into Mansions with tiled roofs.
Chapter 7

While going back to Chung King Mansion from the UNHCR office, I picked a piece of paper on the road bearing the emblem / flag of the United Nations and wonder what it’s all about, not until I remembered that my Country flag has six horizontal stripes, starting from the top, are Black, Yellow Red, Black, Yellow ,Red. In the center, on a white roundel, is a white Crested Crane, the National Bird of Uganda.
All the three colours stand for something even the bird.

Black stands for the color of skin,
Yellow stands for the Sunshine,
Red for the Blood of all Ugandans
And the peaceful bird for the peace of the nation.

I then assumed that the United Nation flag must also have some meaning. I took it upon myself to find out what that was. Guess what!

I discovered that after the Second World War, the United Nations organization was formed by representatives from practically every country of the world, its intention was to keep the world at Peace. The organization then came up with its own flag, which is the Blue with a map of the world between two olive branches on it, all in white. The olive branch is a symbol of peace.
I then picked up interest in the flag thing; I asked myself why “the Red Cross” has a reversed flag of Switzerland’s. I then discovered that the guy, Mr. Jean Dunant, who persuaded most governments to agree that those who got wounded and the medical services in the war after the battle of Solferino in 1859 should be regarded as neutrals, and this guy was a Swiss and it was decided that the flag should be like Switzerland’s with reversed colours.
It was even more interesting with the United States of America Flag. I learnt that when the United States declared themselves independent of Britain on 4 July 1776, they adopted a new flag to replace the Union Jack. They chose the Stars and Stripes.

The stripes (seven red and six white) to commemorate the original thirteen states which formed the Union and the Blue canton, there are many stars as there were States in the Union.

The Fifty Stars now represents the fifty States in the Union now. The Stars signify a bright new constellation that had arisen among the nations.

Now I understand why United Nation has very many Treaties / Convention including the UNHCR just because they want to keep the whole world at PEACE.
Chapter 8

My interview was scheduled on 5th Jan. 2007 at 8.30am. On that very day and at exactly 8.30am I was on the line with the other guys, at 9.00am the main door was opened and we all went through the usual body search. I was called in for the interview at exactly 9.45am, as I entered the interview room, a gentleman who introduced himself to me as Mr. Peter welcomed me. I asked him his second name but he said Peter was enough and that he is my case Officer, that he will handle all things regarding my case.

We then entered into business. He asked me to identify myself. I did that and thereafter, I started narrating my story but he would ask me questions here and there while busying himself on the computer typing everything I was saying. In fact, he fired me a lot of questions that I can’t estimate how many they were. After about one and half hour, we took a break of about 15 minutes.

Later the interview resumed and it lasted up to 7.30pm. He told me we would continue from where we stopped on 10th Jan. 2007 at 2.30pm. In fact according to the way he conducted the interview, I felt a bit relieved because at that point all his questions seem to be relevant. I left the place with a five days valid asylum seekers certificate - visa.

On 10th Jan, I remember it was a Wednesday, I kept the appointment time and I was there at the required time, but guess what? The line was so long that by the time I was let in, it was already 3.00 o’clock I asked the gentleman at the registration desk whether I was very late and he told me it was o.k. I took my seat and waited. It was quite a long wait, I waited up to 3.30pm when I was called in, and I found Mr. Peter waiting. He welcomed me with a smile like the first time. He also apologized for the long wait, which I said, was fine. Are you ready to continue with the interview? He asked. I said yes.

We started from where we had left although he repeated some of the questions he had asked before. During the interview, there were a lot of questions concerning myself, my country and my political party including people involved. This time we took a different interview room from the previous one. Generally the interview was quite similar to the previous one, however, this time he was mostly concern with the core reason why I felt my life was threaten. Nevertheless, the interview ended at around 6.00pm and Mr. Peter asked me whether we could have another quick one the following day. I said yes.

He asked me to wait in the waiting room while he prepares for me another certificate. I waited for about 30 minutes, I was called into another room where a lady handed me the certificate but she told me that I was to come back two days later that was Friday not the following day as Mr. Peter had told me, it was only a different of one day so it really didn’t bother me.

The following day I got a phone call from the UNHCR office changing the time for the interview from 8.30am to 4.30pm. On 12th Jan I reported there as usual and there were only some few guys around but nevertheless the interview started at 4.30pm, it lasted only 30 minutes and we proceeded to a break of an hour.

When we resumed, Mr. Peter fired me a lot of questions which appeared to be provocative and that made this third section of the interview very different from the previous ones. I kind of got
disturbed but I did not show him. When we were concluding, he told me, the interview was over. “Is there anything you would like to ask or add?” he asked. I told him I did not have any more things to add. He then told me that he would pass over everything to the UNHCR panel of Judges who will look into it and make a decision. He said if I’m given a refugee status, then UNHCR will give me protection, but that if my case is rejected, I will have another chance to appeal within 30 days from the day of rejection.

And that if the appeal case is again rejected, it would then be closed and have nothing to with my case anymore. He then told me to wait while he prepares my certificate of which he handed me later and I left the place at exactly 6.30pm. This certificate is valid up to 28th February 2007.
20 May 2007 was World Refugee day. This is a day that is internationally considered and observed as the Refugee Day. I guessed it’s the day that people around the world should know and believe that refugees are real and they do exit. Above all everybody should acknowledge that each one of us is vulnerable to becoming a refugee or seek refuge or asylum in another country.

In Hong Kong, this day is the day that all refugees and asylum seekers in Hong Kong are called together by Christian Action. It’s a special day for these guys and Christian Action organizes some kind of a “Get Together Party.” Last year 2006, the party was organized at St. Andrew’s Church in Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon. It was a colorful day characterized by beautiful performances that included traditional dances by various groups from different countries especially Nepal and Congo.

People from all over Hong Kong converged to this place though they were non refugees and not asylum seekers. The most entertaining bit was a group of young ladies from Nepal who had the skill of dancing freely and easily with sets of fire/light on their heads. It was also the time that the refugees and asylum seekers made an open plea to the government of Hong Kong to hear their cry for food, shelter and protection.

In fact I think the Hong Kong government considered the plea of the asylum seekers because now there are three categories of refugees or asylum seekers. There is one group that has already been given UNHCR mandate or refugee status. These people get financial assistance from Caritas International under the courtesy of UNHCR. There is one group of asylum seekers who have signed contract with International Social Services (ISS) the are those who have immigration recognized letters especially those who have been in detention, they get 1,000 HK$ for accommodation and food supply every two weeks.

The last group is composed of asylum seekers who have no immigration letters and did not sign a contract with ISS because this contract was stopped by immigration that only those with their recognized letters should sign. This group of asylum seekers are afraid of going to detention in order to get the recognized letters and therefore do not get any assistance for accommodation nor food supply.

This year 2007 Refugee Day, there was a poetry competition that was organized by Christian Action; it was about the “Sense of Asylum”. I had never written any poem before but I decided to pick up a pencil and within five minutes, I jotted down something that I did not imagine would become the best, anyhow, everything came flowing from my mind as I wrote.

Here is what I wrote.
Sense of asylum

Oh Motherland
Land without thunder
The land without storms and strangers
The home of all.

Where do I come from?
Father and Mother can’t hear me
Where do I come from?
Really where do I come from!?

No Motherland is foreign land
Where do I dwell?
Where is my River of milk and gold?
My stomach never asks no less.

Abundant is the milk of full breasts
No sleep I never cry for

Oh my country land
So far is the foreign land
I open my eyes and see,
Nothing of my own
Black and far is the foreign land
Blind to see no children
No children of the woman
Alone and frighten is me

Oh my brothers and sisters
Has foreign land eaten you?
My voice is loud for you.

Oh my sweet home!
How I miss you sweet home
I sleep awake
The eyes close no more
Oh Refugee!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
The saying that “If you can’t find what you like, like what you can find” is something worth not ignoring, it carries a lot of meaning; you will never know it until you have known it. At this point I started liking my misery and sufferings as the result of my involvement in politics. I also started wondering if really there is any truth and justice in this world. This thought led me into thinking of writing a second book which I must start working on immediately after this. I have not been able to write about the outcome of my case with the UNHCR and the reasons why I left my country but stay with me and you will have them in my next book.

I have been hearing the words “Human Rights” since I was a child and I believe it’s alright for human beings to have rights since animals also do have rights. What puzzles me most is only “Rights” are always talked about, what about the “Lefts”? “Human Rights” or “Animal Rights” are all rights; I think my next book will mainly cover the “Lefts”

Thanks for your time for going through this Book
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Lakony Wilson DD was born in a Christian family on 11 November 1970 in Gulu district, Northern Uganda.

He went to Mary Immaculate Primary School and Christ the King Demonstration for his elementary education.

In 1985 he joined City High School in Kampala where he did his Ordinary level education and later proceeded to Bombo Senior Secondary School for the Advanced level.

In 1994, he joined ATRSC in Nairobi-Kenya where he majored in ACO –IATA/FIATA. Mr. Lakony is a member of FDC a political party in Uganda, member of Globalink an International anti tobacco organization and a member of amFAR.

Mr. Lakony has training in Public Health from the institute for Global Tobacco Control at “The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health”.

He is the Founder/Director of “Seek and Find Nursery school in Gulu, Northern Uganda.”