

REFUGEES FROM DRC – nkamira, rwanda

On 27 April, refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) began crossing the border to Rwanda. They were fleeing fighting between rebel militias allied to General Bosco Ntaganda and government forces in North Kivu Province. Numbers increased steadily and by early June, approximately 11,000 refugees were being accommodated temporarily at Nkamira Transit Centre (TC), some 25km from the DRC border. Nearly 85% of the refugees are women and children; many fathers and men stayed behind in DRC to keep cattle and other assets safe.

The UN is coordinating the emergency response along with the Government of Rwanda. They approached Save the Children to respond to children’s needs in Nkamira. Huge numbers of children were spending their days roaming around the TC in precarious situations. Their physical, emotional, educational and psychosocial needs were not being met. Children of all ages were exposed to numerous risks: running behind big trucks bringing new refugees and supplies; being unaccompanied by parents and exposed to abuse and violence; neglected by parents who were anxious by the recent upheaval; and themselves distressed by the new situation they found themselves in.

Save the Children has responded by creating Child-Friendly Spaces (CFSs) in Nkamira, and working with the refugee community to raise awareness about child protection issues, as well as set up mechanisms to deal with any abuse or violence against children. Due to severe constraints on space in the very overcrowded TC, we have been obliged to develop a flexible approach, carrying out activities in several fenced off areas in Nkamira.

This note describes the CFSs from the point of view of children and parents in Nkamira.



Save the Children’s emergency response team at Nkamira Transit Centre.

INNOCENT

Innocent is 12 years old. He came to Nkamira Transit Centre with his mother and one younger sister. His father decided to stay behind in Goma, just over the border in DRC, in order to take care of their family's cattle, which are valuable assets. Innocent relates that many families split up like this, which explains the very high number of women and children among the refugees in Nkamira; UNHCR puts the figures at nearly 85%.

Back in DRC, Innocent was in the fifth class of primary school. That abruptly stopped when his family was forced to flee the fighting and cross the border to Rwanda. When they first arrived, there was nothing to do in Nkamira and he and his friends would just wander around. He also had to help his mother with some domestic tasks, such as fetching water.



Innocent stands in front of a group of boys who are singing songs and playing with a football, led by two Save the Children animators

For the past five days Innocent has been attending the recreational activities organised by Save the Children in Nkamira. With a broad smile he says he's really happy when he's engaged in the activities, and proceeds to list his favourite ones: football, volleyball, and singing – especially a local song about not being able to sleep without high morale.

He also relates that Save the Children's animators have been teaching the children in his group some tips about health and hygiene, and the importance of washing hands. They even learned some songs to go along with these messages.

Innocent gestures to another fenced-off CFS a few hundred metres away where a larger group of children are playing. He explains that his little sister is there. On other days they'd been in the same group, but she changed today as she didn't want to play football.

After a few minutes chatting, Innocent is anxious to get back to his group of friends to continue the afternoon session of activities. They have formed a circle and are taking it in turns to tell jokes or stories. At the sound of uproarious laughter, Innocent runs back to join them.

NZAMUTUNGA

Nzamatunga has eight children. The youngest is 4 months old; the oldest is 17 years. The children all came with her to Nkamira as there were rumours that the rebel forces in DRC would try to recruit children, especially teenage boys. Her husband decided to stay in DRC since they have three cows which are valuable and need daily care. “It’s dangerous” she says, “but many men stayed, and at least we can speak by mobile phone”.

Nzamatunga relates how her children were confused and frustrated when they initially arrived at Nkamira. “They were just sitting down doing nothing and looking bored”, she says. Especially the youngest ones were puzzled by this new place, and the adults could not make much time to spend with them and explain what was happening.

“Now the children think it is fun here”, says their mother about the change in them since they started joining Save the Children activities. The siblings are not all in the same group but she laughs as she relates how they tell her each day about the activities they have done, the songs they have learned, and the new games they have played. She says that they even continue the game of ‘cat and mouse’ without the animators in the evening, because they find it so funny.



Nzamatunga with her youngest daughter, Agathe, at Nkamira Transit Centre. Her seven other children spend several hours each day engaged in Save the Children activities.

Nzamatunga explains that in addition to being happy for her children to have some fun engaging things to do during the daytime, she is also relieved for a few hours each day when she can concentrate on taking care of her baby, Agathe, and talking to neighbours. “Now, I am not worried about where my children are”, she says.

ELIADE

Eliade is in Nkamira with her two children, a seven year-old girl and a thirteen year-old boy. Eliade says that both of her children enjoy going to participate in Save the Children's activities.

Her daughter is a little shy, and this afternoon she decided to stay with her mother to help her washing some clothes. "My son loves Save the Children so much that he's always disappointed at the end of the day and the activities are over", she says. Eliade thinks that the activities are useful because they occupy children – their bodies and their heads – and makes this difficult time living as refugees pass faster.



Eliade and her daughter take a break from washing clothes to explain the positive impact that the Child-Friendly Spaces have had on children in Nkamira

"Before they were just sitting around and in their boredom they were doing dangerous things", says Eliade, referring to how children would run after the huge UN trucks that deliver food and transport new refugees to Nkamira. "Now they're safe – and having fun."

ALICE

Alice is 12 years old. She came to Nkamira with her mother, one younger sister and one baby brother. Her remaining four siblings stayed in DRC with her father. Alice says her mother is worried about her oldest sons, since there were a lot of rumours that Bosco Ntaganda, the rebel leader in DRC, might try to recruit them into his army. Alice explains that her parents decided to separate the family in order to keep their cattle and house safe. Her parents talk every day on the phone, they're even on the same phone network as Nkamira is close to the border with DRC.

Alice says that she's been going to the activities run by Save the Children since they began. As the oldest sibling with her mother, she has a few domestic tasks to do, such as peeling potatoes and looking after her younger brother and sister. "As soon as I've finished, I go to the activities", she says, adding that she goes to both the morning and the afternoon sessions.



Alice outside the tent, provided by UNHCR, in which her family is staying

Alice's favourite activity is singing. She proceeds to demonstrate, and sings the song that she learned yesterday, laughing shyly when she finishes. "So many of my friends from home are here", she says, gesturing to a group of children who are watching us. "We like it here".