

TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY
CORRESPONDENT

DAR ES SALAAM, TANZANIA
She's learned to sleep in the rain. When spring storms pound the sheet-metal roof like a timpani and drip through marble-sized holes over the bed, Neema John curls around her son, Toni.

Shifting the 4-year-old clear of the leaks, she rearranges the mosquito net around them and whispers until he drifts off again.

The 20-year-old has made the room where they live, in the Kigogo slum here, as cozy as she can. The bed, with its embroidered sheet, is made with hospital precision. Each brown couch cushion is topped with a teal doily. In one corner, a week's water sits in lidded five-gallon buckets; in another, a small clay stove stands ready.

In this neighborhood built on a trash heap, Neema is a world away from her little brothers, Bill Clinton Hadam and Igey Muzeleya. Resettled outside Atlanta two years ago as refugees, the boys have



STRANDED IN TANZANIA: NEEMA JOHN IS A STATELESS CHILD OF REFUGEES.

been attending US public schools, developing a taste for pizza and chicken fingers, and learning the names of TV wrestlers.

Their sister is a warm young woman with a ready smile. She's easy to love, and her neighbors do: Mama Suzy, across the hall, considers her a close friend; Oscar, a skinny teen next door, calls her his big sister. Neema's fond of them, too, but they don't really know her,

she says. If she told them the truth, she could be deported, or worse: "There's no one here I can trust. If they found out what I really am, I don't know what they'd do."

What is Neema *really*? A victim and a survivor, a mother and child. A stateless migrant, buffeted by the political and social violence that has swept Central Africa since she was a child.

Ethnic killing made Neema a refugee twice before she was 9. At 13, when she fled a more intimate threat in the Tanzanian refugee camp where her family was confined, she became an illegal alien in the country of her birth. Today, 14 million documented refugees and asylum seekers are living outside their homelands worldwide. Those who fall through the cracks in that system, like Neema, live in a fearful limbo outside existing laws, scraping by on the margins: often through the charity and at the mercy of strangers.

THEY SHOT HER FATHER: That's Neema's first memory. One evening in 1996, when she was 7, men with guns came through the front door of her Rwandan home and killed her Hutu dad in front of her; her brother, Fidelis; and their Tutsi mother. All Neema's memories before that night – of her father's face, of the games she and her brother played – vanished as shots rang out.

"These traumas I had, they made me forget," she says.

Neema, Fidelis, and their mom, Dawami Lenguyanga, ran out the back into a mob of terrified neighbors. Many homes had been attacked. Fleeing crowds trampled children, the elderly, anyone who fell. Fidelis was lost in the confusion.

Eating leaves and trash, drinking from mud puddles, mother and daughter ran for days. When they'd crossed into Tanzania, they hitchhiked the breadth of the country to Dar es Salaam. On their way to the United Nations refugee agency to join throngs at the gates, they were approached by a round-faced man who asked: "Where are you going? Do you know the way??"

Hassan Mwanasumpikwa, a fellow refugee from Congo, had
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ON THE WEB

This article and its accompanying slide show are part of a year-long multimedia project following Congolese refugee Bill Clinton Hadam's family and the charter school he attends in Atlanta. Go to: CSMonitor.com/littlebillclinton.

LOST IN MIGRATION



Neema John's earliest memory is the slaying of her Hutu father in Rwanda. She lived in refugee camps until she ran from rapists. She's raising Briton, 4, alone.



► COVER STORY *continued from previous page*

been in town a few months. He opened the taxi door for them, paid for the ride, and waited with them in line. When they reached the front, he told officials his own harrowing story: of imprisonment, torture, and flight. The three left the office together.

"I'll protect you," he told them. And he tried.

BUT LIFE IN THE CAMPS WAS BRUTAL. Mukugwa, in western Tanzania, where Dawami and Hassan married, was a protection camp for 2,000 refugees: mostly "mixed" Hutu-Tutsi couples fleeing persecution in Rwanda and Burundi. Still, Neema never felt safe there.



All she's done, all her life, is lose people. Now, what Neema wants most is to take her son to Georgia, where he'll be safe and she can be her mother's child a little longer.

Rape, and what social scientists blandly call "transactional sex" between children and adults, were common in Mukugwa and surrounding camps. Reporting a rape required police investigation and medical examinations that carried a major stigma.

"Raping happened to many girls in Mukugwa," says Hassan's friend Jean-Paul Rukundo, a Burundian refugee still living with his wife and eight children in a nearby camp. "It was a small place, so we knew."

One day in 2002, when Neema was 13, Dawami sent her to gather firewood. In the woods, two older boys raped her. When Neema got home, her mother remembers: "She just looked dazed."

Neema, ashamed, told her parents the boys had tried to rape her but failed. Hassan didn't buy it: He says he reported the incident to the police, to Tanzanian camp authorities, and to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. His family's UN case file includes no record of the report, but his friends say they remember him making it.

"I made reports everywhere," he says. "They kept saying: 'The investigation is going on.' But they didn't do anything."

Hassan was popular in the camp; known by the

nickname "Protection." His friends say it galled him that he couldn't protect his own stepchild; Dawami blamed herself for sending the girl off alone. After a few days, Neema sneaked away from the camp. "I had so much shame," she says.

CHURCH, NEEMA THOUGHT, WOULD BE SAFE. Her mother was raised in a church and met Neema's father singing in a church choir. So she ran to a house of God.

By the church in nearby Kibondo lived a minister and his family. They took Neema in and, for a time, treated her like a daughter. Dawami learned her whereabouts and wrote letters begging her to come home. Once, she sneaked out of the camp to beg in person. Neema couldn't bring herself to explain what had happened.

Then, in 2004, the family went to church one Sunday, leaving Neema home to do chores. She was scrubbing a floor when the minister's two sons entered the room. One came at her from the front, one from the back, and they raped her.

When the minister's wife came home, Neema was writhing in pain. She accused Neema of being a "sinful girl" and threw her out. Neema staggered around town until dark, and asked a passing woman for help. She lived with her for two years: through the birth of Neema's son, Briton "Toni" Joseph. The older Toni grew, the more Neema felt like a burden.

Late in 2006, she returned to the camp to ask her parents' help. The walk was just a few miles. The emotional journey—through town, past the church, through palm forests, and over rutted roads—was much longer. When she arrived, her family was gone. Friends took her in, and Neema reached Dawami by phone in her Atlanta apartment, sitting on a donated sofa. Neema says: "I felt so bad, but I had to tell her. When I told her I had a child, she cried so much."

HIS FEW EARLY PHOTOS SHOW TONI as a somber baby. Today, he walks to the corner store by himself and brings back change. He roams the slum footpaths looking for mischief with his posse of barefoot friends. At his public preschool he is learning to write: "O" came easily; "A" is giving him trouble.

He has as happy a childhood as Neema can build for him with humor, ingenuity, kind neighbors, and \$50 a month sent by Dawami, now a housekeeper at Georgia State University, and Hassan, a poultry-plant worker. Her income is above the \$400 annual average here. But as a single mother, alone, she feels vulnerable: "I worry all the time."

There are legal worries, too. Neema tells neighbors, truthfully, that she was born near Mt. Kilimanjaro, and that her family is in America, but brushes off questions about her past. She lives in fear she'll reveal herself as a refugee, and be jailed, deported, or separated from her son.

All she's done, all her life, is lose people. Now, what Neema wants most is to take Toni to Georgia,

where he'll be safe and she can be her mother's child a little longer.

"Sometimes I don't even believe that such a thing can happen," she says. "The day I'll see her ... it will be a great joy."

Meantime, outside Atlanta, Neema's parents and brothers have just received their US green cards. After one failed attempt, they're working against the clock to petition US immigration to allow Neema to join them before September, when she turns 21, the reunification program's cutoff. A recent flurry of activity by caseworkers has given the family hope that Toni and his uncles, now 7 and 9, could grow up together.

AS DARK FELL ON KIGOGO ONE RECENT RAINY EVENING and Neema lit the candle on the table, Toni came into the room crying. He didn't want to go to sleep. He wanted to leave with some young friends who'd been visiting from another part of the city.

From where she sat on the bed, Neema scooped him up. He stood on the bed frame in the candlelight, leaning into her.

"Aye, Toni. Ah, my baby boy." She nuzzled him with his favorite toy, a hand-me-down from Uncle Igey. "You want to leave Mama? [And] Doggy?"

"I want to go," he wept.

"You want to leave your room and go? No," she soothed, pawing him with the dog and softly woofing.

Outside, his friends shrieked, playing in the dark. On the stoop next door, women gossiped under a bare bulb. Up the hill in the square, vendors were erecting small tables with cold beer and hot barbecue. Faintly, the sound of a radio carried across the slum. Toni was choking on his tears. He wanted to leave—for good: "Mama, we'll go together."

Now Neema was battling tears, too: "Don't you remember yesterday, I showed you a plane?"

"No," he whimpered. But she had his attention.



With \$50 a month from her parents, who resettled in Atlanta, **Neema John** (above and top) is able to make a tidy home for her son in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

"The one that passed over there?" She pointed over their heads, through the window grate.

"We're going to get on it and go to Grandma," she said. "Soon. Very soon." ■

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