# ON THE RUN

Uganda's infamous anti-gay law forced hundreds of LGBT people to flee to Kenya, a country nearly as inhospitable as their home. What can the UN do to protect them?

BY JACOB KUSHNER
PHOTOS BY JAKE NAUGHTON

A gay man who fled Uganda's anti-gay law in February 2015 awaits his initial interview with the UNHCR to determine whether or not he qualifies as a refugee.

Ketifa was 16 when her best friend Sharon kissed her in the dormitory of the private girls' school they attended in Kampala, Uganda. The two had grown up together in the city's Mutundwe district, but Ketifa had never felt romantically attracted to her, or any other woman, before. The only child of a conservative Muslim sheikh, Ketifa had long been taught that same-sex relations violated the laws of Islam. The kiss overwhelmed her, and her gut told her it was bad. She refused to talk to Sharon for the next week.*

In that time, she couldn't get the kiss out of her head. "I was taken by surprise," she said. "But I realized I enjoyed what she did." Eventually, she went back to Sharon and told her she wanted to kiss her again. It never occurred to Ketifa that two women could have a relationship, but she wanted to do what felt good. Because Sharon was a prefect, she had her own private room. While the other girls spent their Sundays watching movies in the shared dorm, Ketifa and Sharon would stay in bed together. They knew the risk. Homosexuality had been against the law in Uganda since the days of British colonial rule, and it carried a potential 14-year prison sentence. Ketifa's father taught her that Islam prescribed 100 lashes for a first offense and a beheading for the second. "In Uganda, you grow up knowing being a homosexual is bad. It's like how you learn being a thief is bad," Ketifa said. "If you are a homosexual, you are a curse to the world, to the nation."

For many months, Ketifa and Sharon's relationship deepened, and they talked about finding a place to live together after they graduated. In class, they passed love notes pressed into the pages of textbooks. One day, Ketifa left a note Sharon had written her inside a book, and a classmate discovered it that afternoon. "She came and confronted me," Ketifa said. "I told her it was just a joke, but she started talking about it and people started making their own conclusions."

Rumors had already been swirling that Ketifa and Sharon were spending time alone in Sharon's room, in violation of school rules. So when news of the note reached the dorm's matron, the school's administration didn't hesitate in making a decision: Both were immediately expelled. Ketifa went back to live with her uncle, her sole guardian since the death of her parents a few years earlier. Sharon returned to her childhood home nearby. The pair didn't see each other for days. "Her parents were very strict," Ketifa said. "They locked her in the house." A few days after returning to Mutundwe, Ketifa heard the drumming of the local community council's messengers: They were holding a meeting at Sharon's parent's homestead. Curious, Ketifa disguised herself as a man in a T-shirt and a baseball cap and went to see what it was all about. The council leader announced the reason for the gathering: Sharon stood accused of having homosexual relations. They did not announce the accuser, but the reason for her expulsion had reached town. The council leader never mentioned Ketifa by name, but some of the people in attendance began eyeing her. She suspected that some of them could recognize her; it was well known that she and Sharon were best friends. Sensing danger, she decided to return to her uncle's house before the meeting concluded.

Hours later, Ketifa's uncle reported how the meeting had ended: Sharon was beaten to death. Ketifa was shocked. The council generally punished people with forced labor or, at worst, a caning. She ran over to the family's yard, but it was too late. She could just make out the shape of Sharon's body lying uncovered in the darkness.

Ketifa's first thought was to flee for her own safety, but since her parents were dead, she didn't have anywhere to go. What's more, her uncle was a wealthy man—a respected member of the community, someone not to be challenged. So long as he didn't out her to the community council, Ketifa figured she'd be safe. She tried to keep a low profile while mourning Sharon, and in time, she began studying at a new high school, graduating four years later. In 2013, she enrolled in one of Kampala's most prestigious universities to study law. Her uncle paid her tuition, and she moved into a private dormitory near the school.

Soon, Ketifa began dating a classmate of hers, a girl. It was her first relationship since Sharon. On Valentine's Day 2014, Ketifa's roommate walked in and discovered the two having sex. The roommate screamed, and with her voice sounding throughout the halls, the entire dormitory came to witness the excitement. The dorm's caretaker paraded Ketifa and her girlfriend away as their classmates jeered.

This time, Ketifa had more reason to worry. Homophobia was at an all-time high in Uganda. Two months earlier, the country's parliament had passed its notorious Anti-Homosexuality Act, dubbed the "Kill the Gays" bill in the Western media for an early provision that prescribed the death penalty for some people who engaged in gay sex. A slightly modified version of the law eventually passed. It called for seven years in prison for those found guilty of attempting to participate in a same-sex act; actually completing the deed came with a 14-year prison sentence. The law also created the crime of "aggravated homosexuality" for same-sex relations between serial offenders, sexually active HIV-positive people, and others. It carried a potential life prison sentence. The debate over the law, which had been before Uganda's parliament for nearly five years, brought out some of the most extreme homophobia the region had ever seen. Newspapers published front-page photo spreads of "Uganda's 200 Top Homos Named." Attacks ensued, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Ugandans increasingly went into hiding.

Like many other LGBT Ugandans, Ketifa found herself uprooted during these months. That Valentine's Day, with

* **Names have been changed throughout this article to protect the identities of subjects who face threats of homophobic violence.**

nowhere else to go, she reluctantly returned to her uncle's house in the neighborhood where her first love had been murdered. It was the worst decision of her life. By the time she arrived, the owner of the dorm had already called her uncle to tell him she'd been caught having sex with another woman. "When I walked in, he grabbed me by the hand, took me to the room, and tied me to the bed," Ketifa said. "He brought some of his friends into the room and told me, 'Let me see what men can do that women can't do.' He said to them, 'Show her what you can do.' He locked the men in with me, and they took turns raping me." Each did "two rounds," she said. The rape lasted an hour.

Ketifa's uncle kept her tied up until the morning. After he finally released her, he ordered her to do housework. She was cleaning when she saw them coming: the same members of the community council who had murdered Sharon. Ketifa ran out the back gate and fled by bus straight for Uganda's border with Kenya, believing nowhere in the country would be safe. At the border crossing at Malaba, she learned that to get to Nairobi, Kenya's large capital city, would be expensive, and to live there even more so. Ketifa recalled how, as a child, a Kenyan classmate of hers had mentioned that Kenya accepts people who are chased out of other countries, letting them live in large camps. Along the side of the road, she spotted a food vendor; she lied and told him that she was on her way to visit a friend in one of these camps. Could he direct her?

He asked if she was referring to Kakuma—a large refugee camp in northern Kenya that opened in 1992 to house refugees fleeing Sudan's civil war, and that has since become home to nearly 200,000 refugees fleeing all manner of strife. The man described how she could get to Kitale, a town in the northern

**Below is a street scene from the Eastleigh neighborhood of Nairobi. A number of LGBT Ugandans made the dangerous trip to Kenya's capital after the passage of the Anti-Homosexuality Act.**

Rift Valley. From there, she could take a bus through Lodwar and on to Kakuma. Ketifa had no money, so the vendor offered her a job: To earn enough for a bus ticket, she could wash dishes for a few hours. Three days later, Ketifa arrived at Kakuma, a refugee of Uganda's violent homophobia.

With the anti-gay fervor growing in Uganda, Ketifa wasn't the only one to leave the country. A few weeks later, on March 11, a group of 23 LGBT Ugandans appeared on the front lawn of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) office in Nairobi. They wished to register themselves as lesbian, gay, and transgender refugees. Most were in their late teens or 20s, and most were men. They came from all over Uganda—some were working class, others were university educated. A Ugandan priest and LGBT ally in Kampala had directed them to the office.

When the 23 Ugandans showed up outside her office that day, she brought them to a conference room to hear their stories. As they shared the terror they had experienced, De Langhe became worried about how safe the group would be in Kenya. They had come to a country that remains deeply homophobic and still punishes same-sex activity with up to 14 years in prison. The homophobia extended to the refugee camps as well. While most of the other refugees in the country had successfully escaped the conditions that had upended their lives, these gay refugees were entering an environment that posed many of the same threats of violence. "I thought, *This is a special group*," said De Langhe. "They were very young and very desperate. The majority of them were actually targeted by their own family, which I think makes it extra hard."

In Kenya and across the globe, the UN routinely gives priority to asylum seekers who are extremely vulnerable and have immediate protection needs, such as unaccompanied minors and people with life-threatening diseases. Given this precedent, there are many reasons to hastily register people who might face grave danger while awaiting asylum. With some guidance from the UN's Division for International Protection in Geneva, De Langhe and her colleagues decided that this group needed special protection. They moved to expedite their asylum claims—to get them through Kenya as fast as possible.

## In March 2014, a group of 23 LGBT Ugandans showed up outside a UN office in Nairobi, Kenya, seeking refugee status. They had come to a country that remains deeply homophobic and still punishes same-sex activity with up to 14 years in prison.

The priest had been a secret adviser to the gay community since 1999. After local newspapers reported that two men had married each other in Kampala, he published an op-ed condemning the wave of homophobia erupting in Uganda. At the end of his article, he listed his phone number. LGBT people started calling, and his home soon became a haven for Ugandan gays. "It was a safe place where people could speak about their orientation in a way they never could before," he said. "My approach was to help people to accept who they were and to be aware of homophobia in society and ensure that they didn't get themselves lynched."

In the wake of the passage of the Anti-Homosexuality Act, the priest led some LGBT people hiding from their families and the police to shelter. But when the funding for the hideout dried up, many, fearing for their safety, said they wanted to leave the country. The priest told them that he didn't think Kenya would be any better, but they felt that they had no other choice. When they arrived in Nairobi, he counseled them to go to the UN to seek help.

On the second floor of the UNHCR building, a blond Belgian woman named Inge De Langhe sat in her small office. As the senior resettlement officer, De Langhe had arrived in Kenya in 2012 to help find new homes for the luckiest among the country's 550,000 refugees. Since she took the job, only a few thousand had been successfully resettled each year. It was a rate far lower than the rate of new arrivals.

But fast-tracking some refugees comes at the expense of others. There are 24,000 people in Kakuma and 8,000 in Nairobi on the waiting list for an appointment to determine whether or not they even qualify for refugee status—a six-month backlog. And sitting around for your turn is just the first step in a process that normally takes several years. Most refugees wait months or even years for consultations, but De Lange and her staff began interviewing the 23 LGBT refugees within weeks. They also contracted a partner NGO called HIAS to provide safe houses to live in and small stipends to live on. "To be perfectly honest, we've never had a group that received such support and attention," said De Langhe.

If it is a difficult time to be a refugee seeking resettlement out of Kenya, it is a difficult time to be doing so anywhere. Last year, there were more than 60 million refugees across the world—more than at any time since the end of World War II. And even though requests for asylum are at an all-time high, the number of refugees who successfully resettle is in decline: Only 73,000 were resettled in 2014, down from 98,400 the previous

**A lesbian refugee from Uganda poses in one of the LGBT compounds at Kakuma Refugee Camp.**

year. Despite the unique threats against LGBT refugees from Uganda, did they deserve a disproportionate number of these slots? And how could they be protected while they waited?

After the decision to expedite the refugees' claims, the UNHCR, in partnership with HIAS, placed some of them in apartments in a poor neighborhood of Nairobi, where they lived in small rooms and sometimes shared beds. The ability of refugees to remain in Nairobi depended on the traditionally lax enforcement of Kenyan law, which requires all refugees to live in either Kakuma or Dadaab, another large refugee camp in the north.

But the Ugandans arrived at a time when refugees in Kenya were in the crosshairs of the country's security forces. After al Shabaab terrorists sieged Nairobi's Westgate Mall and killed more than 60 people in September 2013, the Kenyan government needed to at least appear to be taking steps to root out the group. Refugees became the easiest targets for the country's war on terror. In April 2014, the police swept hundreds off the streets in the Somali quarter of Nairobi, temporarily detaining them in the Moi International Sports Center, a soccer stadium built in the late 80s for the All-Africa Games. Soon, the refugees were relocated to the camps.

In late March 2014, police raided the apartment holding the LGBT refugees and jailed them. The UNHCR negotiated their release before they could be shipped out of the city, and with no other choice, placed them briefly in an upscale hotel. It wasn't long, though, before the police discovered them. The officers threatened to deport the whole group back to Uganda. Once again left with limited options, the UNHCR persuaded the cops to bus the refugees immediately to Kakuma, the refugee camp in northern Kenya Ketifa had fled to.

Kakuma sits in Kenya's Turkana region, not far from the border with South Sudan. It is a flat, sprawling city of 184,000 people from Sudan, Somalia, and other neighboring countries. The UN provides monthly food rations, access to public water taps, and rudimentary medical care. Kakuma is large. Hundreds of miles of semi-arid desert surround the camp. Twelve square miles of people live cramped together in single-story huts. It's an inhospitable place—next to nothing grows in the dry, hard ground, and temperatures regularly reach well into the 100s. Situated only a few hundred miles from the Equator, and with most of the area's trees long ago chopped down for firewood or to make charcoal, there's little escape from the sun. Most of Kakuma's inhabitants spend their days with nothing to do. Aside from reselling food rations or charcoal for cooking, not much work exists. A couple lucky ones find jobs with the UN, its partner agencies, or NGOs active in the camp.

When Ketifa arrived at the camp in February, UNHCR officials asked her reason for fleeing, and she told them the story of Sharon's beating. A UNHCR official introduced her to a few other LGBT refugees from Uganda who had arrived directly to the camp in the previous months. When the 23 Ugandans who had been living in hiding in Nairobi arrived, they joined the small group. "I was so happy to find people coming from the same country—some even the same village—and all the same orientation," Ketifa said.

They had been given their own sleeping quarters in the camp's warehouse-like reception center, though all that separated them from the other refugees were some curtains and sheets hanging from the ceiling. Speaking with the others, Ketifa realized she might get out of the camp before long. "When I went to the UNHCR officials, they told me the maximum stay would be a year, and then I'd be given my status and get resettled," Ketifa said. The LGBT refugees became a close group and consequently a target for harassment. They would mostly keep to themselves, but brawls would often break out when they crossed paths with straight refugees during mealtimes. "I figured, OK, for one year I have to live in this place where people discriminate against you, but then I'll leave."

One day, Ketifa saw job postings looking for teachers at a secondary school for children in the camp. She had never worked as a teacher, but having gone to secondary school and one of Uganda's top universities, she was more qualified than most. "I knew that I needed a way to survive in the camp, but on the other side, I was scared that people would at one point find out I was an LGBT," she said. "How would they react? How would I defend my position?" Despite her fears, Ketifa applied for the job and was accepted. She hadn't planned to build a life in Kakuma, but she was slowly making one.

When I visited Kakuma last October, De Langhe, who was transferred from the camp to Nairobi in May, greeted me in an open-air room filled with old wooden benches. Every asylum seeker arriving at Kakuma in the past two decades had passed through that room. De Langhe led me to a small office. Covering the walls, shelves held fat, three-ring binders. Inside, they contained the names from a 2011 census conducted to determine who, among the tens of thousands of people qualifying for food rations, actually still lived in the camp.

"Most of the population of Kakuma will be here for life,'" De Langhe said. Even the 1 percent who win a ticket to a new life will usually have to wait several years before they are authorized to leave. There's been an uninterrupted backlog of asylum seekers since the day the camp opened. Preceding the backlog for resettlement is another backlog entirely: registering the camp's mass of immigrants as refugees. De Langhe has been tasked with triaging between the two lagging processes. "I wish we could submit more for resettlement, but I'm more disturbed by the fact that people are waiting for years to get the basic determination on their refugee status so they can move on with their lives," she said.

From Monday through Friday, De Langhe works to keep the process moving as best she can. She volunteers her Saturdays to listen to different elders and ethnic group leaders. They complain about the harsh environment, about attacks from other refugees. They say the Kenyan police seem to do nothing about it. There are more than 20 nationalities and numerous ethnic factions living side by side in the camp. Every Saturday, De Langhe visits representatives from two of them. Usually they sit outside in meetings that last several hours.

"They always start very aggressively," she said, but understandably so. The camp is a horrible place to spend a life. De Langhe considers their concerns intently, and she quickly takes steps to remedy them as much as possible. Despite the fact that De Langhe is the face of the agency that stands between them and a new life, most refugees have nothing but unconditional praise for her. De Langhe, one refugee told me, "is the one woman I most respect in this world."

As De Langhe and her team worked through the asylum claims of Uganda's LGBT refugees, she expected that their arrival was just a brief anomaly in her refugee-heavy corner of the world. But soon, more LGBT refugees arrived—one or two each month at first, then at least a dozen

**ABOVE: A gay refugee from Uganda poses for a portrait in the apartment he shared with his boyfriend in Nairobi. Six months earlier, seven men wielding machetes had broken into their home and nearly killed him.**

**LEFT: Records of people in the Kakuma refugee camp line the walls of UNHCR's processing office. There are 182,000 refugees in the camp, and most will never be resettled.**

at a time, fleeing not only Uganda's anti-gay legislation but also homophobia in Burundi, Ethiopia, and elsewhere in East Africa. By last spring, more than 200 LGBT refugees had ended up at the UN's doorstep, all demanding swift asylum. Speaking to a researcher with the Global Philanthropy Project, one new arrival said, "I expect to be in Kenya for three months and be resettled to the West."

Suddenly, De Langhe found her staff overwhelmed by LGBT refugees, and she worried that her own decision to prioritize these LGBT refugees over others was partly to blame. By giving LGBT refugees expedited processing and small cash stipends, the UNHCR and its partners may have created a pull factor that enticed even more people to flee to Kenya.

Some people also sought the advice of Western allies as to how to seek refugee status in Kenya. One was Isaac, a 25-year-old gay man living in Kampala. In April 2015, a local paper outed Isaac for "sodomizing" another man—his boyfriend, Patrick. Afterward, unsure of what to do, he sought advice online. He came across some articles on a human rights blog written by Melanie Nathan, a South African lawyer and activist who moved to the United States in 1985 to open a clinic that advocated for the rights of LGBT immigrants. Nathan had been following the Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Act and the wave of homophobia that ensued, and by 2014, she was in touch with numerous LGBT Ugandans. She began blogging about their plight. Sometimes Nathan would advise Ugandans who had decided to flee for their own safety. When Isaac emailed Nathan, she responded immediately. Later that month, he and Patrick left for Kakuma.

Nathan wasn't acting alone. Many LGBT rights advocates based in the United States were actively encouraging Ugandans to flee, sometimes even sending money to help them make the journey. The Friends New Underground Railroad, a Quaker group that sprang up in Washington state to help ferry vulnerable LGBT Ugandans to safety, says it helped more than 1,300 such people escape to neighboring countries, to Europe, to the Middle East, and even to North America.

Other refugees were encouraged by the social media postings of their friends who had been successfully resettled in the Global North. Even those who hadn't been relocated encouraged those still behind in Uganda to come to Kenya. According to a July 2015 report from the Global Philanthropy Project, "many respondents described how LGBT Ugandans in Nairobi encouraged their friends and partners to join them, sharing information about the asylum process and stories of a freer life."

In contrast to refugees from South Sudan or Somalia, most of whom are extremely poor, the Ugandan refugees came from a variety of financial circumstances. Many came from Kampala. Some worked jobs at restaurants, while others held university degrees. There were students, and some of the youngest ones hadn't even completed high school.

As more and more started to make the journey to Kakuma, the American Jewish World Service and a small Kenyan NGO set up a transit house in northern Kenya, located about halfway between the country's border with Uganda and the camp. The goal of the transit center was to intercept LGBT refugees coming from Uganda and give them shelter for five days while they considered what to do next. On one of these days, the prospective refugee would be bused to Kakuma, given a tour, and then brought back to the transit house. There, he or she would spend another day or two contemplating the challenging conditions and homophobia he or she witnessed. Many opted for an illegal life in Nairobi instead. A few turned around and went straight back to Uganda.

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Homophobia is an ingrained part of life in the camp. Not long after Ketifa began teaching at the school, rumors spread about her homosexuality. Although she wasn't out, she could be seen living with people who appeared stereotypically gay, and she didn't have a husband or boyfriend. "We hear students say '*shoga! shoga!*,'" which means gay, she said. "Some of them come to your face and say, '*Mwalimu* (teacher), you're not going to teach me! Because my parents told me a shoga cannot teach me because shoga is bad.'"

In November 2014, parents, most of whom Ketifa said were Somalis, called a meeting to complain to the school's principal. Soon after, the principal called a meeting with Ketifa and two other gay Ugandans. "He said either we have to change from who we are, or we will lose our jobs," she told me. Three weeks later, the teachers received letters from the school: They had been let go.

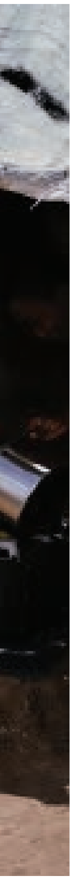
“People have very strong religious convictions,” said Muthee Kiunga, the UNHCR’s associate protection officer under De Langhe at Kakuma. “The Somalis, even the Christians, they strongly believe this is something wrong. So it was very difficult for these people, these 20 people. It became very difficult for them to integrate in the camp.”

The discrimination sometimes erupted into violence, threatening the lives and homes of the gay refugees. Somali and Sudanese men attacked the LGBT refugees, sometimes even throwing rocks and injuring them. To avoid conflict, LGBT refugees would wait until all the other refugees had eaten to go get their own meals. Fearful that they’d face even worse violence if they were released into the general camp population, the entire group refused to leave the reception center that was meant to hold them only briefly.

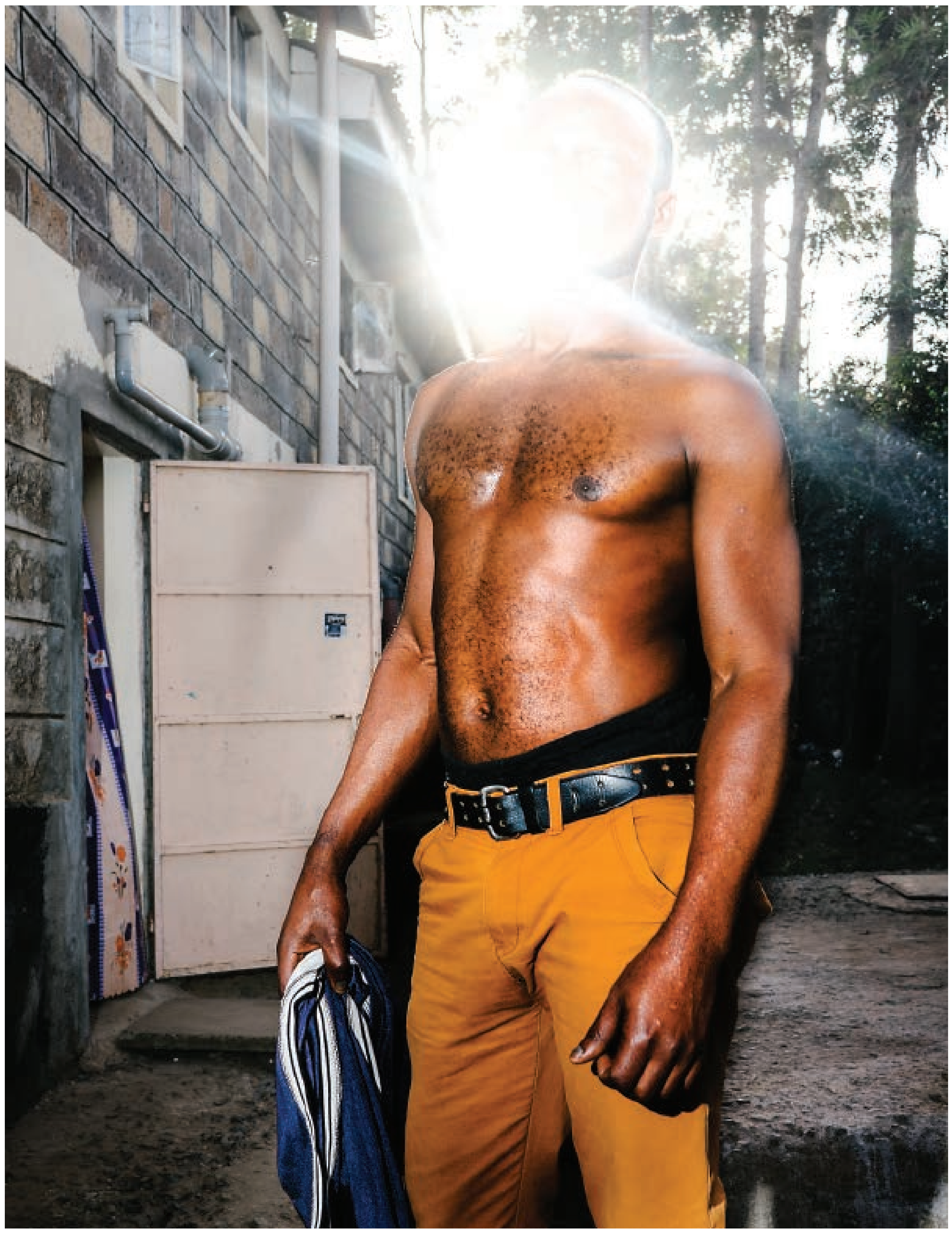
Kiunga recognized that he couldn’t change the attitude of 180,000 refugees overnight, and there was no way to guarantee the protection of the LGBT group in the camp. “We had a very difficult time trying to figure out where we could put them,” Kiunga said. “Will they be attacked? How do you prevent a Somali from throwing a stone at them?” So Kiunga and his staff devised a plan: In order to persuade the LGBT refugees to join the camp’s general population, the UNHCR would find them a plot of land where they could live together as a small community, within shouting distance of a police station. Instead of following Kakuma’s custom, giving the refugees construction materials (or money to buy such materials) and telling them to build their own houses, the UN directed a partner organization to build small huts, with mud walls and tin roofs for the LGBT community. Workers placed thorny shrubs along the perimeter as a makeshift border for protection and privacy. When the huts were completed in July 2014, more than 20 of the early LGBT arrivals, those who had spent two-plus months hiding out in the reception center, reluctantly moved in. Ketifa was among them. As more LGBT refugees arrived, they settled into a second compound built right next to the first.

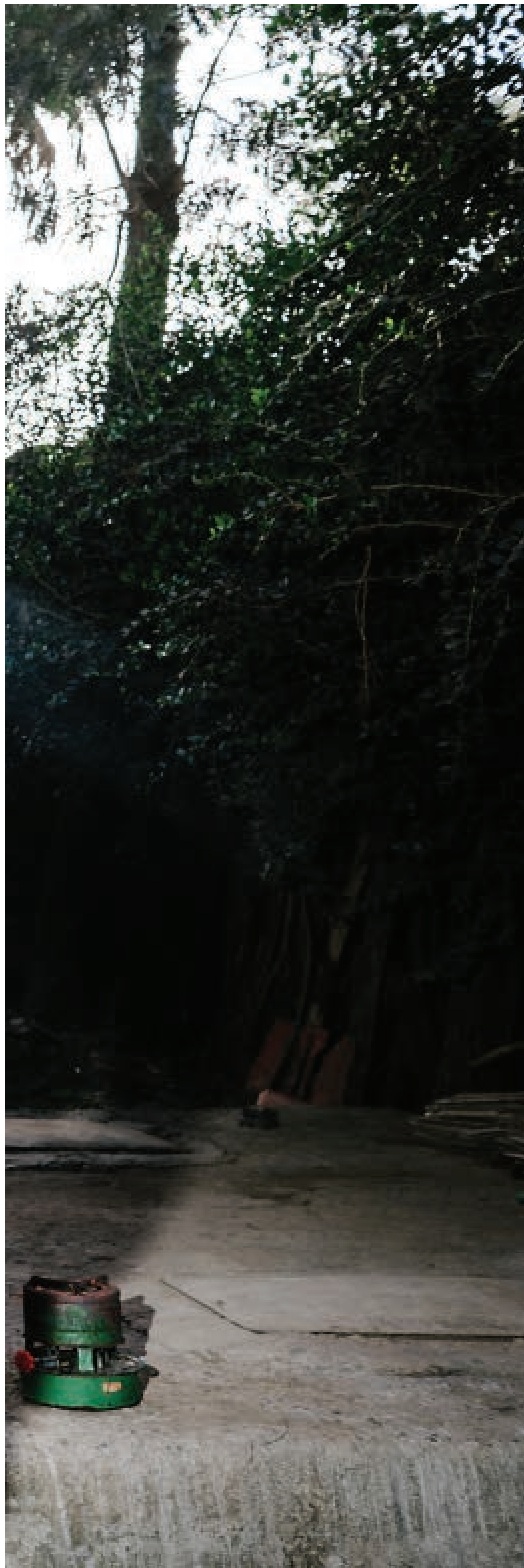
The collection of huts is by no means luxurious. Inside there are mattresses on the ground and opened suitcases spilling with clothes. Mosquito nets along with shorts, dresses, and underwear dangle from the ceilings. Outside a few small chickens wander around. On windy days, a tarp hung between two houses to create some shade blows about softly.

**A gay refugee gestures toward one of the huts that are standard issue in the Kakuma camp. A hole in the wall, one of many in this particular building, is partially covered by a UNHCR tarp.**



**THIS SPREAD: Fearing for the safety of the LGBT refugees in Kakuma's general population, the UNHCR built them a compound near a police station where they could all live together.**





The compound also came with its own water tap, so Ketifa and the others wouldn't have to suffer harassment when they went to get water. But the tap has become a major privilege, as LGBT refugees aren't the only people who get turned away at the public ones. In Kakuma, discrimination is a universal phenomenon. "It's within tribes, within the Sudanese community too. Nuers don't want to give to Dinka to drink. Children are being beaten because they are Hutu or they are Tutsi," said Kiunga. "Water is a very precious resource. It is not only LGBT."

As other camp residents noticed the special privileges given to the LGBT refugees, some became envious. "The LGBT group, as small as it is, receives so much attention from everyone that sometimes we get complaints," Kiunga said. "'How can you treat these people so special? How come they stay here for six months and they're gone? I've been here for six years. I have problems. How come these people get to go so quickly?'"

An LGBT activist in Kenya's Turkana region who goes by Brian was an early advocate for LGBT refugees arriving in Kakuma, but he was also an early critic of the UNHCR's decision to give them special treatment. "We went there and I met Muthee, and we told him, 'What you are doing is not good,'" Brian said. "You build them nice houses, and you bring a police force close to the house, and you give them a gated compound, and you give them water inside this compound. All these are good things. But what do you expect to happen when these other communities begin asking questions?"

It's no wonder, he said, the LGBT refugees face discrimination by other residents. Even after the compound was built, threats of violence continued. Once a month, on food distribution day, each resident visits the distribution center to collect his or her rations. On at least two occasions, when the LGBT refugees went to collect their food together, they returned to find the shrubs that surround their compounds ablaze. Last September, some of the LGBT refugees formed a soccer team, but the other refugees forbid them from competing in the camp league. When a few LGBT players joined other teams instead, those teams also were suspended.

One day in September, posters handwritten in Kenyan Swahili surfaced around the camp: YOUR CHILDREN ARE GOING TO BE TRANSITIONED TO GAY BEHAVIOR. IF YOU SEE SOMEBODY WITH YOUR CHILD, PLEASE RUN TO THE POLICE FOR ASSISTANCE. LET'S JOIN HANDS AND ERRADICATE THIS HOMOSEXUAL BEHAVIOR. "It was like a warning," said Kiunga. He and his colleagues studied the handwriting and took turns guessing the author's nationality. But it could have been anyone. De Langhe brought the letters to the attention of the police, but the signs continued to appear near the LGBT complex for weeks.

Despite this, Brian still thinks that the preferential treatment has contributed to the pull factor. "If someone gives you an opportunity for greener pastures," he said, "you will go."

It's not just in Kakuma that LGBT refugees receive certain privileges. While some of them, by choice or from force, settled in the camp, the majority opted to live in Nairobi. Particularly for Ugandans who grew up in metropolitan Kampala, the city was a logical choice over a refugee camp.

Those who went to Nairobi received help that other refugees did not: cash. HIAS, the international refugee resettlement agency, secured funding from the UN to offer LGBT refugees in Nairobi monthly stipends of 6,000 shillings—about $60. It was

**A gay, HIV-positive refugee from Uganda poses outside his house near Nairobi. As a refugee, he receives a small stipend each month from the NGO HIAS, but he often can't afford enough food to take with his anti-retrovirals.**

A man overlooks a street in the Nairobi neighborhood of Eastleigh, where many LGBT refugees have settled temporarily.

barely enough to pay the rent, much less purchase food or cover the transportation back and forth from resettlement interviews. But it was better than nothing at all. Those stipends were, in many ways, exceptional. HIAS offered them seemingly without limit, whereas traditional refugee stipends are only offered for a prescribed period of time. Even unaccompanied minors usually received only four months of financial assistance. But the level of giving wasn't sustainable. According to the Global Philanthropy Project, one UNCHR partner spent its entire 2014 budget for refugee stipends in just two months.

The privileges offered to LGBT refugees may be part of the reason why the UN has had to worry about the issue of fraud. LGBT refugees claim to have seen people collecting money under a false pretense: They pretend to be gay. Aaron Gershowitz, who oversees global operations for HIAS, finds the idea of widespread fraud unlikely. Last year, when he spent several weeks in Nairobi improving the process of distributing stipends, he didn't hear anything from his staff about fakers. HIAS only serves people who have already completed their initial UNHCR registration as refugees. So if it's true that some imposters receive assistance, it isn't the fault of HIAS.

Still, the idea that some people might fake being gay to get assistance or to get resettled abroad spread fear inside the UNHCR last February, when more than 76 people claiming to be LGBT refugees showed up at the Nairobi office on a single day. The mass arrival conjured worries of an organized trafficking ring. De Langhe said she received a tip from the Ugandan priest who had ushered the first group of refugees to be careful about the newcomers. "When you have 70 people at your door in one day, something is happening," De Langhe told me.

This newfound anxiety about imposters made the UNHCR's work even more challenging. De Langhe delayed the processing while her staff sorted the legitimate LGBT refugees from the posers. "These 76—there may be genuine cases among this group, but their cases may be jeopardized because of the false cases among them," she said.

If there are fakers among the hundreds of people applying for refugee status and claiming to be LGBT, De Langhe said she wouldn't entirely blame them for trying. "Why do we have fraudulent cases? Because we have a pull factor. We have to admit that," she said. "If you are a poor single man living in Uganda in difficult conditions, and you hear about LGBT cases from your

country going quickly to North America, you could take your chances and represent yourself as an LGBT. I think that's normal."

"It's a very sensitive issue, very personal sometimes," said Kiunga. He knows of at least two cases in which people asserting to be LGBT had their refugee status rejected because they didn't seem credible. Verifying a refugee's claim of being LGBT has proven tricky for the UN. You can't simply judge it based on an applicant's sexual history. For one thing, not everyone, especially the young people, will have had a sexual experience. In addition, the lack of a past relationship may even "be an indication that he or she has been seeking to avoid harm," according to guidelines by the UNHCR.

For some refugees, these interviews can be jarring. Natah, a lesbian from Kampala, recalled breaking down in tears as she recounted how her mother disowned her and her father attacked her when they found out she was gay. "The interviewers gave me a pen and paper and told me to write something about myself," she said of her first UNHCR interview. "I wrote that I lost my family because of what I am." During the second interview, "I almost lost it because I thought about my mom. I started crying. I was like, 'My mom found out what I was—and she asked me to leave.'" Slowly, painfully, she gave them her story.

To keep from unnecessarily forcing applicants to relive their trauma, the UN offers some no-goes: "Detailed questions about the applicant's sex life should be avoided." "Medical 'testing' of the applicant's sexual orientation is an infringement of basic human rights and must not be used." "It would also be inappropriate to expect a couple to be physically demonstrative at an interview as a way to establish their sexual orientation." Without such hints, the UN must rely almost entirely on an applicant's testimony and the consistency and logic of his or her story. Friends and family members can't usually be called for verification: For many LGBT refugees, these are the very people who chased them away in the first place.

After Ketifa was fired from her teaching job, she waited in agony to be resettled. She hadn't bothered applying for another position. "They don't care how you're performing," she said. "All they care about is your sexual orientation." With little to do but sit and chat with the other LGBT refugees, Ketifa considered moving to Nairobi. Her friends insisted that she could lead a less boring life and more easily avoid discrimination. In order to move, though, she needed to obtain permission from Kenya's Department of Refugee Affairs, which was a nearly impossible task. She knows a few LGBT refugees who have run off illegally, but she remains too frightened to follow them.

Indeed, Nairobi offers some obvious advantages over the camp. As a large city, it has many gay and lesbian inhabitants. Although some refugees say they've met gay Kenyans, most live apart from the gay social scenes that exist here. Some have gone to a downtown gay club—one that perennially gets raided by police. But for most, their communication with Kenya's LGBT community is primarily digital—they message over WhatsApp, share photos and videos on Facebook, seek relationships on Grindr.

Somewhere on the city's southern outskirts, 30 LGBT refugees shared a large house along a rocky street. They spent their days inside listening to music, cooking, and eating together. Outside they played netball, a team sport that resembles basketball. They only left the compound to buy food or attend meetings and interviews at various resettlement agencies, government offices, and foreign embassies. At least, though, they lived in relative safety in a community of their own. Until late last year, that is, when threats by homophobic neighbors became so severe that they decided to abandon the house altogether.

The LGBT refugees in Nairobi are perennially being chased out of their homes. One sunny Saturday in February 2015, a group of LGBT refugees gathered at a house in a densely packed neighborhood for a celebration. One of them was leaving. Francis, a gay man from Uganda, had been granted resettlement in Sweden less than a year after he arrived in Kenya. His good fortune gave hope to the rest.

Among the 50 or so guests at the send-off was Natah, the lesbian from Kampala who had fled to Kakuma in early 2014. Natah had eventually left for Nairobi, where she met and became friends with Francis. For the party, Francis dressed in a skirt. Normally Natah would tell him off for such behavior: "Sometimes I would go say hi to him, and I would find him in a skirt, a dress, makeup. I'd say, 'You're in Nairobi, remember?

"What you are doing is not good," said an LGBT activist from Kenya's Turkana region. "You give them a gated compound, and you give them water inside this compound. All these are good things. But what do you expect to happen when these other communities begin asking questions?"

They are homophobic here.'" But that day, with Francis on the brink of freedom, she decided the skirt could stay.

The party was going strong, with Ugandan music playing and lots of dancing. But Natah, who didn't drink, decided to head home a little after sundown. She bid a final farewell to Francis, who insisted she give him one last, loving goodbye slap on the ass. Fifteen minutes later, Natah was standing at a bus stop when her phone rang. It was her friend Josephine, another Ugandan lesbian, who was still at the party. "She said, 'The police have come. They're going to arrest us.'"

After Natah had left, she learned, Kenyan police stormed the apartment complex. Josephine had locked herself in a room. Over the phone, she described to Natah how the officers were coming for them—room by room, digging through their clothes, checking under the mattresses. They seemed unsure of what they wanted to find.

The officers herded everyone into the center of the complex. They ordered the group to sit. "They were like, 'You're holding a party without permission,'" recalled Raj, a gay teen from Uganda attending the celebration. He said Francis, as the host, pleaded with the officers, declaring that he did have permission. One officer yelled at him to keep quiet, and another slapped him, according to Raj. "They were like, 'This is no joke—this is Kenya. This is not Uganda.'"

Police insisted that they should all be sent to Kakuma, as the law required. The cops arrested them, taking 35 to jail. There, the police divided them into two small, dirty cells. It was late at night, but nobody slept—there wasn't enough space for everyone to lie down on the cold floor. Some decided to take turns; others sat or squatted.

The next morning was hot. Some of the refugees removed their shirts to stay cool. One man fainted, and the others persuaded the police to let him go to a hospital down the road. The day passed slowly into another night. It wasn't until dusk the following day that UNHCR officials persuaded police to release them. They were never charged with a crime.

As soon as the LGBT refugees got out, some headed for the hospital to check on the friend who had fainted. There, they found Natah, who had rushed to the hospital to care for the man. He had recovered quickly, but the nurses wouldn't let him leave: They insisted that he clear the bill first. Natah spent a day making phone calls to friends and advocates—anyone who came to mind. She needed to raise 2,300 shillings—about $25—to pay the bill. Finally, the gay-friendly priest from Uganda donated the money.

As the group of LGBT refugees left the hospital that night, Natah said they seemed relieved to be free. But the ordeal reminded them that they were still "prisoners," in the words of one Kenyan police officer. They lived as outcasts in a foreign country—gay in a place where to be gay is to be a criminal. Natah saw Francis that evening outside the hospital. He was hours away from flying to a country where he would be free, but he didn't say much. "It was not a happy moment," said Natah. The refugees returned to their apartment to gather their belongings. Clearly, the neighborhood was not safe. Over the next couple of days, they would scatter to different parts of Nairobi.

Francis was still one of the lucky few. Though LGBT refugees had been expecting swift processing of their asylum claims, not many saw the kind of attention that the initial group of 23 refugees had received. With more refugees arriving, the process slowed, and people like Ketifa, who had been among the first LGBT people to flee Uganda, were forced to wait. "Right now I'm not aware of my refugee status," she said one day last fall. "I'm still in doubt."

By the end of 2014, the UNHCR couldn't expedite all the cases, so De Langhe's superior, UNHCR Assistant Representative for Protection Catherine Hamon-Sharpe, decided to consider each of them individually. The UNHCR simply didn't have the time or resources to expedite so many claims. Africa's LGBT refugees would no longer be on the fast track to resettlement.

Last March, some of the refugees who had been expecting swift resettlement protested outside the UNHCR office. A group wrote a letter saying that long delays for interviews "have resulted in several life threatening challenges to the LGBT migrants living in Kenya."

If the UNHCR thought ending special treatment might put a swift end to the pull factor that was drawing Ugandans to Kenya, it was wrong. The transition was slow. Even though Uganda's high court struck down the anti-homosexuality law on a technicality in July 2014, "nothing changed immediately," said the Ugandan priest, who had continued to help dozens of Ugandans find temporary shelter in houses on the outskirts of Nairobi while their cases lingered. He said it wasn't until late 2015 that the pull factor began to decrease. Whereas the success stories of early refugees had enticed other Ugandans to follow their lead, the new tales of harassment and violence—of stagnation and disappointment—"had a dampening effect," he said. "People thinking of going out think twice or thrice before they up and go. Now with the long-term wait for interviews, people are just not willing to wait so long."

Finally, this January, Ketifa received the decision she'd waited two years for: Her refugee status was approved. "We held a prayer. We prayed thanking God for the good news and praying others will get theirs too," she said. Now she'll begin the long process of security and medical checks at the embassy of whatever country agrees to consider resettling her.

On a hot Sunday morning in Kakuma last October, a group of about 20 people gathered in a makeshift church in the gay refugees' compound. The humanitarian tarps that cover the ground between two of the huts looked pristine. Four thin pews had been crafted from mismatching planks of wood. As they took their places along the benches, the churchgoers sang a Ugandan hymn.

Eventually the priest, Solomon Mugisa, joined them. Born to a Pentecostal pastor father and a studious, Anglican mother, Mugisa attended Christian schools and Bible colleges his entire life. He knew well that the Anglican Church has a reputation as one of the most homophobic in all of Africa. But somehow that fact didn't stop him, a gay man, from becoming an Anglican priest. "I know that God doesn't discriminate," he said. "He loves you whoever you are."

The same cannot be said of the Ugandan police. In March 2014, photos began circulating on the internet that depicted Mugisa celebrating at the 2012 World Pride Festival in London—a momentary indulgence he had made during two years he spent on a Christian exchange program in the UK. But back in Kampala, police arrived at his home one evening. Officers took him to jail, where he spent the next five nights. On the sixth morning, he was let out on bail. He immediately fled to Nairobi, and the UNHCR soon bused him to Kakuma,

where he became a leader of the group of Ugandans—both practically and spiritually.

At first, on Sunday mornings, Mugisa would take the refugees to the existing churches in Kakuma to pray, but they were always chased away. So Mugisa decided to create a church of his own, within the homestead the LGBT refugees share.

If Christianity and homosexuality were ever at odds, you wouldn't know it from the Sunday morning service at the gay Ugandans' compound in Kakuma Camp 3. On this particular Sunday, people gave thanks. One woman thanked God for helping her complete "medical"—that is, the medical portion of the resettlement process to get to the United States. One man said he was thankful for having a church where he can pray. ("He never could have imagined he'd attend a church that accepts him," Mugisa explained. "He even started to hate God.") Another man stood up: "I thank God for my protection. Last night I was walking by some shops and I was attacked. But thank God I survived them."

Even Ketifa, a Muslim who had never stepped foot inside a church before arriving at Kakuma, attended. She said the local mosques refused to accept her because she is a lesbian. Standing attentively in the back row, she joined the Christians around her in the singing.

More than an hour into the service, after the songs and the prayers ended, Mugisa gave his weekly sermon. "God has a book of life," Mugisa told his worshipers. "He remembers your name. But to be written in this book you need to do good." Mugisa turned to his congregants. "Mulondo, Lujja, Kasule, Nansamba: You want to be able to say, 'God, I served you when I was in Kakuma camp.' You want to be able to say, 'I served you in Uganda. Remember me. This is what I have done, remember me.'"

Suddenly, Mugisa stopped. During the unexpected silence, one could hear screams of "amen" coming from the yellow church down the road—one of the churches that had chased out the LGBT refugees before they started their own. Mugisa glanced around his congregation of LGBT worshipers, catching the eyes of a few of them. Unable to ignore the trepidation on their faces, he comforted them. "Trust me—one day we will be out of this place." VICE

**Natah, a Burundian lesbian refugee, and her Kenyan girlfriend share an apartment building with other refugees in Nairobi, Kenya.**