

War in Sudan Brings 14-Year-Old Scholar to DRC

By Carlinda Lopes 30 August 2019

Story found on UNHCR site

Gift, 14, has been top of his class for the past three years. That may not be enough to keep him in school. "When I grow up, I would like to become a teacher. I would like this job because I like to help those who have less knowledge," he said of the ambition that has driven him forward against the odds.

Those odds were considerable. Gift fled the war that was ravaging his homeland, South Sudan, a conflict that had claimed the life of his father. Determined to succeed, he learned French from scratch and even designed his own light from spare parts of a broken solar lamp so he could study at night.

Despite all his hard work, a huge cloud hangs over Gift's future. The talented teenager is in his last year of primary school in the eastern stretches of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) where secondary school places are few and far between.

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, helps refugee children such as Gift go to school by providing cash grants that help families to pay fees, and to purchase schoolbooks, supplies and uniforms. But both funds and opportunities are limited, particularly at secondary school level, which means Gift and thousands of other South Sudanese child refugees may have to call a premature halt to their studies.

Gift and his uncle – who became his legal guardian after his father was killed and he lost touch with his mother – sought safety in Biringi settlement, in the DRC, in 2016.



South Sudanese refugees go back to school in Biringi, Democratic Republic of the Congo. (Rayan Hindi, producer, camera-editor / Thomas Freteur, camera) [Video Link](#)

"I had to quit school because of the war. When I found out I was going back to school, it made me happy." The boy well remembers his first day in Uboko primary school, where 800 local Congolese and refugee children study together after the school was rehabilitated by UNHCR. He was excited and thankful for a new opportunity to learn again.

"The war makes a lot of people suffer – I had to quit school because of the war. When I found out I was going back to school, it made me happy," he recalled with a smile.

Mastering French, the main language of instruction in the DRC, was achieved by attending language courses provided by UNHCR – with Gift even winning a province-wide spelling contest.



Then he had a practical problem: no electricity meant he had no light by which to study at home at night. His solution? To design his own solar-powered lamp. "I had to build this," he said, holding out a flimsy light made of three bulbs and a solar battery held together by tape.



South Sudanese refugee Gift, 14, places charge his self-made solar lamp so he can study at night. © UNHCR/John Wessels

As South Sudanese children continue to seek refuge in Congolese territory, the education gap is only increasing. Only 4,400 out of 12,500 South Sudanese children in the DRC have access even to primary education. Until recently, they had no secondary opportunities whatsoever.

In 2019, UNHCR started a small program to enroll refugees in secondary school. It also helps to construct and refurbish school buildings. Even so, of the more than 6,000 South Sudanese secondary-age refugees, a staggering 92 per cent still do not go to school.

Gift knows the odds are stacked against him. And he fears he will be regarded as worthless in the eyes of both his host community and his fellow refugees if he cannot get an education. It is vital to both his hopes of becoming a teacher, he says, and of becoming a voice for others in his position.

Yet he simply cannot imagine life without education. "It would be horrible if I couldn't go to secondary school," he said. "There should be a way for everyone to study."

"The alternative to school is waiting around with no clear options for the future."

Ann Encontre, UNHCR's Regional Representative in the DRC, said there are "extraordinary talents" among the young refugees she has met. "When you talk to them, you see how eager they are to learn."

Secondary school gives refugee adolescents a sense of purpose, a vision of the person they can become, and the knowledge that will one day help them rebuild their homes, she adds.

"The alternative to school is waiting around, with no clear options for the future. This is why we are doing all we can to keep them in school."

This story is featured in UNHCR's 2019 education report [Stepping Up: Refugee Education in Crisis](#). The report shows that as refugee children grow older, the barriers preventing them from accessing education become harder to overcome: only 63 per cent of refugee children go to primary school, compared to 91 per cent globally. Around the world, 84 per cent of adolescents get a secondary education, while only 24 per cent of refugees get the opportunity. Of the 7.1 million refugee children of school age, 3.7 million – more than half – do not go to school.



Hani Moves from Syria

By Chris Reardon 11 April 2019

[Story found on UNHCR site](#)

After nearly eight years of war, I paid a visit to the house where my friend Hani Al Moulia grew up. Like vast parts of his hometown, it was in a state of ruin. That night, I wrote Hani a letter:

Dear Hani,

I stopped by your house today, but you weren't home. No one was home. Your parents weren't there to join us for tea, and there was no sign of your brothers or sisters. Your neighbors were away too.

I would have knocked, but your front door is missing. Not just the door, but also the hinges and the frame that once secured it to the wall. The floors were strewn with rubble.

I hate to say it, but the place was a wreck.

You realize, of course, that I'm not talking about your family's new home in central Canada, eight time zones away. I mean the two-story house where you grew up in Syria, the one you were forced to flee six and a half years ago, when you became a refugee.

I'm here in Homs, your hometown. I remember you telling me about this place when I first met you in Lebanon, camped out with a thousand other Syrians in some farmer's field. The war was raging here, and you spoke of how, before you fled, your mother would beg you not to go to school. She was afraid you might get shot, or get your throat slit just like your uncle, your aunt, your cousin. You told me about the friends you missed, the rap music you used to make together, the poems you used to write. You were desperate to continue your education, and my colleagues and I felt your story needed to be told.

A man rides a bicycle through the Juret al-Shayah section of



Homs

in March 2019. © UNHCR/Christopher Reardon



This is UNHCR's first piece about Hani. It was published in March 2014, as the war turned three years old. Now I'm here to interview people who are [slowly returning](#) from other parts of the country after struggling for years to stay out of harm's way. Mostly they are coming home to ruins. The epic scale of the destruction reminds me of [West Mosul](#), where I encountered a similar mood last summer: people weary of war, scarred by all they have endured, and eager

to start anew.



One family I met today spoke of their struggle to find work and shelter the past few years. Returning to their apartment in the Al-Qusour district several months ago, they were crushed to see that everything they left behind had been looted, burnt or blown up. Debris filled the place from floor to ceiling.

Slowly they are putting the pieces back together. With help from my colleagues, Jihad and his sons have installed windows and doors to keep the family warmer and safer. A blacksmith and handyman by vocation, he's itching to do more. "I'll fix every one of these houses for you," he said, gesturing with his calloused hands at the crumbling facades up and down his street. "Just give me the tools."

Afterwards, he and his boys took me up to the roof to see their pigeons. Abdelmalek, who's 12, unlocked the cages and soon their flock of 40 was circling overhead, sweeping over the broken cityscape with enviable ease.

Zahra Mackaoui made this award-winning documentary about Hani with support from UNHCR. It chronicles the family's time in



Lebanon and resettlement to Canada.
Earlier versions aired on Channel 4 and Al Jazeera. [Video Link](#)

After watching the birds return to their roost, I got a ride to your neighborhood and walked down your street. There wasn't one parked car. It looks as if everyone has packed up and gone on holiday at the same time. But I know this has been no vacation for any of you.

After eight years of conflict, half your nation has left home. You have been displaced, often multiple times. Today, 5.6 million Syrians are still living as refugees in neighboring countries. Millions more remain displaced inside Syria. It's a relatively small number who, like you, have gotten a second chance in another part of the world.

On your street, there were no stray cats or dogs. Not even any birds. The only sound was the distant whirr of a saw cutting through metal. Your neighborhood, Hani, is a ghost town.



The street where Hani lived (left). Hani's house (center). Hani's front doorway (right). © UNHCR/Christopher Reardon



When I got to your house, I stood at the entryway and gazed right in, like a superhero with X-ray vision. I thought of that nerdy old icebreaker: If you could choose a superpower, would you rather have the ability to see through walls, or to fly? After what I've seen today—the graceful arc of Abdelmalek's pigeons, the grim view into your empty living room—I will always choose to fly.

The interior doors are also gone, even the one to the bathroom with the blue and white tiles, which now faces right onto the street. The kitchen ceiling has collapsed, so I could see through to one of the bedrooms on the second floor—perhaps the one where you used to make your music and write your poetry. Outside your living room window, with a pile of shattered glass at my feet, I stood and stared at the emptiness.

This is what happens in a war zone. Any time the fighting ebbs, scavengers come and take what's left behind. Not just appliances and furniture and pots and pans. They strip the lighting fixtures, the electrical outlets, the wiring. They take the doors and windows, and the wood or metal frames that hold them in place.

The wood they might burn for heat or as cooking fuel. The rest they barter or sell to the scrap man, who sells it to someone else who melts it down. Some of them, no doubt, seek to profit from other people's misfortune. But most, I imagine, are as desperate as those who flee, just doing what they can to survive.

Even in its current state, Hani, your house in Homs is a lot nicer than that place where you were living when we first met five winters ago. Remember [that makeshift shelter](#) in Lebanon, wrapped in plastic sheeting, with just the wood stove to keep you all warm? Your mother poured us tea, and later we stood outside and looked at Syria, that snowy ridge so close we could have walked there in an hour or two.

I considered going inside your old house, thinking I might find something you left behind: an item you once treasured or an everyday object that I could give you as a memento. Then I recalled how you had made sure to grab the most important thing before you fled: your school certificates, which let you to continue your education in exile.

In the end, I never stepped past the threshold. I've done enough security training to know there might be structural damage or live explosives inside, like the mortar my colleagues and I came across a few hours earlier. Or maybe I'd just step on a rusty nail. But mostly it felt wrong, like poking through the wreckage after a ghastly accident.

Hani and his brother Ashraf horse around outside their shelter in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley in March 2014. © UNHCR/Andrew McConnell



It's that time of year again when the media remind us that the conflict in Syria began on March 15, 2011, but we both know that wars seldom start or stop with such precision. We also know that this date has another meaning for your family: it's the day your youngest brother was born. It's amazing how fast these eight years have flown by, and how slowly. How much pain they have brought your family, and also some joy.

Hani, please wish Ashraf a happy eighth birthday for me. And before he blows out his candles, remind him to make a wish of his own. The biggest wish he can imagine. Make one for yourself too.

Christopher Reardon is chief of multimedia content at UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency. He and his team have been following Hani's story since 2013. This open letter was also published on [We the Peoples](#). [Listen to an interview](#) with Hani and Chris on CBC's "The Current".

