

REPAIR PROJECT

# FRANCE

## CYNTHIA'S STORY



***A refugee twice over, Cynthia\* lost touch with her husband after he fled threats of violence in South Africa. After two-and-a-half years apart, the family has been reunited in France, but her husband's permission to stay together with Cynthia and their children still hangs in the balance.***

"I am originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). I was working as a nurse in Goma, but my family was persecuted by the regime there and we had to flee. I left DRC in 2014 and found refuge in South Africa with my two children – my son, who was three at the time and my daughter who was four.

I worked in a hairdresser during the day and in the evenings I worked with the Red Cross, providing care for people who needed support in their homes. In March 2018, my husband joined us in Pretoria

*\*name has been changed*

and he opened a small shop. Life wasn't easy; we were often threatened because we were foreigners, but we got by.

In August 2019, violence broke out. That evening, my husband didn't come home. I looked for him with the help of Congolese friends, but there was no sign. In the days following my husband's disappearance, I began to feel targeted too.

In mid-September 2019, I decided to leave South Africa with our two children. A smuggler organized for us to fly from Pretoria to Paris. When we arrived in France I immediately applied for asylum. I still had no news of my husband, so I submitted a search request to the Red Cross Restoring Family Links (RFL) office in Amiens in France in December 2021. The Red Cross volunteers helped me fill in the forms and forwarded the search request to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Pretoria.

At the end of December 2022, an old university friend of my husband's sent a message via the ICRC's "Trace The Face" website saying that my husband was living with him in Botswana. After verification by the Red Cross in Botswana, they confirmed that this was indeed my husband.

I heard this news in January 2023 – I wasn't expecting it, but we immediately started thinking about



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Online Toolkit



Online Report

family reunification. My children and I had been granted subsidiary protection in August 2022, so we were eligible, but we had to act quickly because my husband's residence permit in Botswana was set to expire at the beginning of March 2023.

The French Red Cross contacted the ICRC in Pretoria and the Red Cross in Botswana to find out about renewing my husband's residence permit, or to find another way that he could start the family reunification process.

But when the Botswana Red Cross contacted the authorities to clarify this information, it alerted them to his irregular situation, and he was summoned by the immigration authorities. After several hours of discussion, and with the help of his friend, the authorities agreed to extend his stay by a month, but only in return for financial compensation.

To apply for family reunification, we had to make an appointment with the relevant French consular post. However, it wasn't possible to start the procedure in Botswana because the French consular post there didn't issue long-stay visas. Faced with these difficulties and the urgency of the situation – by this time my husband's residence permit was once again about to expire – we started looking at options for my husband to apply for a visa for France in another country.

The situation in South Africa was still too dangerous because of the continuing violence against foreigners, so that wasn't a possibility. Despite the risks involved, the only option we could see was for my husband to return to the DRC, and to stay in hiding while he applied for his visa there. The French Red Cross helped us put together his visa application and to make an appointment with the French embassy in Kinshasa.

He was due to leave Botswana to travel to DRC at the end of April, but after he left we lost contact again. For weeks we didn't know whether some-



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thing had happened during the trip, or if he had even arrived in DRC.

In mid-May 2023, I received a call from the RFL office in Amiens: my husband had arrived in France a few days earlier. He had arrived by his own means in Paris and was looking to join us in Amiens. Between surprise and relief, I realized that he hadn't been to the DRC, nor to the appointment with the French embassy.

I waited until I heard his voice to believe it was him before telling the children. They have suffered a great deal from the separation from their father, especially our son who was particularly affected by his absence.

Other difficulties arose when he arrived - he had not entered the country through the family reunification procedure and had no right of residency. Because I and my children are under subsidiary protection, the principle of family unity does not apply and he is not entitled to apply for residency through that channel either. He has had to lodge his own asylum application as the only pathway for him to secure residency, even though we – his family – are already here."

*Images are for illustration only*