

Lusambu Karim

My name is Lusambu Karim. I was born in Uganda and grew up in the Eastern part of Uganda in Nalugugu Village in the Sironko District. In my childhood, I helped around our house and village doing home cultivations, digging and rearing domestic animals such as cows and goats. My life was a good one, and mainly uneventful. We lived in mountains and I was healthy. The only big upheaval in my life was the day I lost my father and started taking care of my brothers and sisters. My Dad was a poor man – he was a driver by occupation. I went to school and stopped at Ordinary Level of Education (UCE) (equivalent to two years of high school). After that, I worked as a driver delivering goods for an electronic company.

In January 2009, I was issued a visa for Iraq. I was initially recruited by a Ugandan security company which was working for a U.S. company that provides demining, construction, and security services for the U.S. Department of Defense in Iraq and Afghanistan. I was hired to work as a security guard on the U.S. Army Forward Operating Base (FOB) Shield from 2009-2010. I worked 12 hours a day, 6 days a week. My salary was \$600/month.

When I compare the work in Iraq with what happened later in Afghanistan, the life in Iraq was not so bad. But there was one event that foreshadowed the terrible treatment some workers faced on U.S. military bases. That day at FOB Shield I will never forget in my life. A Ugandan guard named Julius lost his mind [“went out of his motion”] after a quarrel with our boss. He opened fire on the boss and shot him dead and then turned the gun on himself. That night was horrible.

When I returned from Iraq, I worked in Uganda as an Uber driver. Eight years later, I was recruited to work in Afghanistan by a Ugandan security company. They transferred me to a contractor headquartered in Kenya, and they transferred me to another company where I signed a contract to work for \$450/month as a security guard. My job description was to provide security to U.S. Army personnel, civilian contractors, and government properties within the Army base.

Twenty-one Ugandans (including myself) were sent to Afghanistan in June 2018. We spent two months in Bagram transit area where we were without work. We had a site manager with us and our salaries were credited on our accounts. We were sent from Bagram to Mazar-e-Sharif to a German camp in Northern Afghanistan where we spent a week before reaching our destination, Camp Pamir. I was the leader of our team of 21 Ugandans. We were responsible for providing security for the camp including three entry points and five towers.

We started work immediately, but after about a month, our site manager resigned and his deputy took over. Three months later, the deputy also resigned from duty and we got another site manager. He resigned after a few weeks.

The working and living accommodations were so much worse than what we had in Iraq. We had no PX (Post Exchange) in Camp; the dining facility (DFAC) was so small that we could only pick food and eat from outside the DFAC. We had only one laundry machine for all the OCNs (Other Country Nationals) in the Camp. There was no medical hospital or clinic for us. If we got sick, we had to be flown to Bagram Airbase for treatment. We were not allowed to have or use phones so it was difficult to communicate with our families. The company had a computer

but they only gave permission for all 21 of us to use it once a day for 30 minutes. The computer had poor Internet connection and for the most part by the time one of us logged in and got a connection the 30-minute window was up. Most of us had families in rural villages in Uganda where there was little or no Internet access so for all practical purposes, we were not in communication with our families during the time we were there. Many times, we registered complaints with the company about these problems, but they did not respond. Instead, they sent us information about new torturous rules. Previously we had been able to guard from inside the towers, but now we were told we had to operate out in the open, where there was no shelter from the elements. In the winter it was cold and rainy, in the summer it was so hot (up in the high 90s in the summer). Under duress, we continued to serve even though we were treated so badly. Although we registered complaints about hazardous working and living conditions, they went unanswered.

It got worse. We were “red-badged” and told that we couldn’t leave our compound for any reason. Red-badging is a status they give to foreign workers stuck at the largest U.S. airfield in Afghanistan who have been living in what they describe as jail-like conditions for months after their jobs were cut, but they’ve been unable to return home. Workers with red badges are confined to temporary lodging quarters at Bagram Airfield, where they are constantly monitored by security guards. Those who don’t meet certain security criteria are given red badges — as opposed to green badges, which allow more freedom — and are not allowed mobile phones, regular internet access or trips to the store.

Then our contracts ran out and we were required to work for 6 months without a contract. When the Taliban attacked Kunduz City where our camp was located, I went to the boss, representing the 21 Ugandans and told him that we couldn’t continue working without contracts. I asked him what would happen if anyone got injured or died while on duty. There would be no way to file a case for compensation without a valid contract. He dismissed me without saying anything.

Weeks later, he brought new contract papers for us to sign but that contract was very different from the one that had brought us to Afghanistan in 2019. He ordered us all to sign and said, “Whoever refuses to sign this contract shall not go to DFAC for food.” Oh, it was so stressing. We had to scramble for food wherever we could get it.

On behalf of all the men, I went to the Army Base commander at Camp Pamir and told him all. I can’t forget this! Immediately the site manager was called to the camp commander’s office and told never again to stop anyone from going to the DFAC for meals. He was also told that people had the right to decide whether to sign a contract. But then things just continued as they were before. We were still working without contracts. Some of the guards refused to sign the new contract, but eventually after being threatened most of them signed. Oh, it was horrible.

The tensions were extremely high. After five days, the site manager got into a fight with Nicholas, one of our guards. I was there and I had to physically come between them to stop the fight and divide them. I then had to take the site manager aside and remind him of his duties as a manager. In my mind I held the thought of Julius in Iraq, and how that dispute escalated into two men losing their lives. But it didn’t change much. The site manager was mean and brutal

and he kept getting into fights with the guards, using his authority to bully them. Oh, how horrible was this guy who was in charge of managing us. We were helpless because there was no one above him to complain to. The bosses never visited our camp, never monitored the situation, and never found out what was going on. At that time many of us were working without a contract, without any protection, without any rights. When I spoke on behalf of the men to the site manager I said “Sir, we don’t have any contract outlining our job responsibilities. If you can’t get us a contract, you should book us a flight to Uganda so we can go home.” He replied, “I will as soon as I can get one.” For sure we were working in captivity at that point.

One day we heard that there was a plane flying to Uganda from Bagram. I asked the site manager to book that flight for us. We were trying to get back home since we were working without a contract and were at the mercy of the company who was overworking us, holding us. When we got to Bagram, we found another group of Ugandans from a different camp waiting for the plane. Somehow that group had green badges and was able to move freely around the camp. An American soldier asked us why we were holding red badges this whole time. We said that we didn’t know the reason. He tried to get us some help and we got some temporary relief such as hygiene kits, which we also had not been given, but nothing else came of it.

The Transit Area held so many different people from different countries and different camps with different cultures. The area was filthy. No one was cleaning it. There were no hand sanitizers or water to wash hands before entering the Area. There were hundreds of people from everywhere all using the same showers, toilets, and sinks. This was during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, but no one was testing us. I suggested that everyone should be tested, but they ignored my suggestion. People were sneezing and coughing and several were seriously sick but there was no place to take people if they got sick. We were being held in limbo in this Transit Area. We had to be escorted to go to DFAC and back again. We weren’t allowed any other movements. We were literally prisoners like this for months.

It wasn’t until we found out about Dr. Jonathan Woods, of the Combating Trafficking in Persons Program Management Office (CTIP PMO) that we got some permanent changes in our status. Dr. Woods came to visit us at the Transit Area. He interviewed us and took down all our concerns about how we were being treated. A few days later we were given Transit Badges (non-escort) that Dr. Woods promised. We could finally move freely around the base and we felt released from captivity.

About a week later, one of the Ugandan guards became seriously ill and they took him to a nearby clinic and tested him and he turned out to be positive for COVID-19. At that point, doctors came to our building and removed everyone who had been sleeping near him to an Isolation Area and tested them, and many of them also turned out to be COVID-19 positive.

After treatment everyone was brought back to our same building. There still were no COVID-19 measures or precautions in place. Near my bed, someone tested positive and all of us were then taken into quarantine, that was August 28, 2020. Two weeks later I had another test and tested positive. I was so upset because they were so lax about trying to stop the spread of the disease and we had no protection at all. Finally, on September 23, 2020, they tested everyone in the

building. Many were positive. I wasn't surprised. We had had no masks, no PPE, no social distancing requirements, no soap or sanitizers, and no treatment for the sick. I was upset that we were being held like animals without any medical intervention.

As we were in the building, the military police pulled up and called out my name and my friend, Nicholas, and declared that they were arresting us. We didn't know why and they wouldn't tell us. Everyone gathered around and tried to help us, but they didn't respond to questions. When we got to the MP van, one of the military police said that we were being arrested because, "You have refused to go into isolation." But this was not true: we had only asked that everyone be given the PCR test in order to find out who was sick and who wasn't so that the sick could be isolated and not infect the healthy. Even though this was what we had done, we were taken to isolation where they cast us into a cell for days.

On October 2nd, and again on October 7th, I was tested and the results both times were negative. I was discharged from the hospital, but before I got on a plane to Uganda on October 21st, they tested me again and I tested positive. I was not allowed to board the plane and told that I had to be held again in isolation. I will never forget that. Even now, when I think about it, I shed tears.

Back in isolation, I had barely fallen asleep when they woke me to test me again. This time the test was negative. By this time, I didn't trust anyone – not even my own shadow. I felt that I was a pawn in someone else's game. Again Dr. Woods saved me. He came on his routine check and I told him that I didn't think I would ever get back to Uganda. He took me to a trusted place for yet another COVID test and it again came out negative. That day I was granted permission to travel home to Uganda. But it was not a happy trip. We had all purchased presents for our beloved children and wanted to take all these gifts – smart TVs, air pods, headphones, and other small electronics, but the Bagram military authority made us trash them all. They limited what we could take on board because it was a charter flight – we could only board with the clothes on our backs.

Due to all the delays, when we arrived home, we had little money. I had bills to pay, which thankfully some of my family members paid for me. Many of us experienced family members running away from us because they had heard we had COVID, and we were coming home with no or little money and no presents and gifts. A family friend had to pay for everyone in my house to get checked for COVID. My son-in-law sold his property, including land and house to pay for hospital and other bills. Due to the way we were treated in Afghanistan, and in transit, and the way we came home, life in Uganda has not been easy.