

African Migrants Find a Home at Moscow Charity

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African migrants exchange holiday gifts during a party at the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy community center.

Kevin has always wanted to be a basketball player, and he looks the part. The 27-year-old is broadly built, tall and athletic with long arms. He wears a 76ers cap and talks about the jump shot of his hero, Allen Iverson of the Philadelphia 76ers. Kevin came to Moscow from his native Cameroon with the idea he was going to be playing ball with Ryazan, a team in Russia's SuperLeague. Three months later and still no job, Kevin remains positive; he believes his manager — a stranger to whom he has paid fees with borrowed money — will be calling any day now.

Lunch time on Tuesdays and Thursdays is the rare moment when Kevin feels at home in Moscow. At the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy (MPC) community center, he can pass a few hours among countrymen who speak his native French and understand his plight — alone in Russia on a long, unplanned stay without a return ticket home. Like many, Kevin is

the victim of travel agencies that exploit Africans, duping them into coming to Russia on the promise of a better life. But the reality that awaits them is something different: a mixture of shady documents, hostility and isolation.

While they represent a minority of migrant laborers in Moscow, coordinator at the Task Force Against Racism Penny Grenfell says that deception and exploitation play a major role in how Africans get here.

"Agencies promise a visa to Europe from Moscow, or some other great opportunity," Grenfell says. "Once they get here, an agency representative either strings clients along to get more money, or simply doesn't show up at the airport to meet them at all."

When asked who runs these agencies, Grenfell recalls stories involving agents from Ukraine, Moldova and other countries, but says that it is often Africans who are deceiving Africans

"Sometimes they meet an African at the airport who will scam them, and charge them hundreds of dollars to transport them into the city and find them a place to stay," she says.

This kind of exploitation shares some characteristics with human trafficking, but as many African immigrants are abandoned upon arriving in Russia, it means they are technically ineligible for certain international support structures that are available to trafficking victims.

"Sometimes they'll leave the airport and wander the city without money until they meet other Africans who help them. That's usually how we find out about them," Grenfell says, referring to MPC, which tries to support Africans in such situations in Moscow.

That support comes in the form of language lessons, referrals and help accessing medical care. In addition, MPC offers workshops on racism awareness that coach Africans on how to stay safe in the city. The organization's survey of 27 immigrants in the first half of 2015 found that 67 percent of respondents had experienced some form of harassment.

According to statistics, racially motivated aggression towards Africans in Moscow has been decreasing. But it's still a talking point at the community center. The MPC's biannual report for 2015 details several cases of harassment and violence towards blacks, suggesting that the issue isn't confined to right-wing factions and hooligans.

One report detailed a case of institutionalized discrimination. In May, a pregnant Congolese woman was denied treatment for an asthma attack at one hospital near Partizanskaya metro because doctors thought "she looked contagious." The woman was taken to two different clinics before being given a sedative for the asthma and a small fold-out bed in the ward. Despite the legal right to free emergency care, the woman was told the following day she had to pay 9,000 rubles for every day she stayed in the hospital.

Other reports cited police corruption. For Africans in Moscow on tourist visas, working is illegal, but besides borrowing from relatives back home, there are few ways of making extra money. The most common way is handing out fliers on the street — a job that pays little and frequently involves run-ins with the police.

Capi from Cote d'Ivoire supports himself in another way, selling imitation perfumes on a side street near the Altufyevo metro station. He stands next to two Georgians selling melons

and vegetables out of the trunk of an old car. He says he's gotten used to dealing with police.

"They come and ask for my documents, even though they all know me now," Capi says. "Then it's like, they're laughing you know, and 500 rubles every time to make them leave me alone."

He used to hand out fliers for a dance school, but started working for himself after his former employer became unreliable and exploitative.

"After some other guys disappeared, the director wanted me to leave my passport at the school — so that I wouldn't run away," Capi says.

When asked whether he had experienced hostility because of his race, Capi says he's been lucky.

"About people, all I can say is that Russians are not fundamentally racist, but I noticed that the socialization changes some people, especially young people. I think they ignore the importance and necessity of foreigners in Russia."

Back at MPC, a middle-aged Ethiopian man who declined to give his name talks about how the perception of Africans has changed. In 1985, he came to Russia to study engineering in the southern Russian city of Krasnodar at Kuban State Technological University. Now with a teenage son and married to a Russian woman he met at school, he is completing a Ph.D. program. He says things are different now.

"We were welcomed back then, even exotic," he says. "But just the other day as I was crossing the street, some man in his Mercedes almost hit me. When I put my hand out and touched the hood, he got out of the car and shouted that he would beat me up. That wouldn't — couldn't — have happened back then."

Doumbia, an electronics engineer who has been in Russia since 2007, has an idea why the attitude towards Africans may have changed.

"It's the economic situation. When people enjoy life, they don't have time for hate. All I know about the Soviet Union was it was a great country and people were treated equally."

But Kevin only knows the Russia of today and his knowledge is limited to a three-month experience. While he smiles talking about Ryazan and the 76ers, it's clear he's frustrated.

"Back in Cameroon, we have everything you have in the States — education, jobs, business," he says. "Here, I've got absolutely nothing to do but wait."

All the money he has brought to Moscow is gone, and he says he's borrowed the last of what his mother can spare. His visa is good for another three months, but the future is pinned on the manager's call — one that may never come.

Talking about the position he'll play for Ryazan shows the truth of his situation.

"Forward, center, point guard — I'll play anything."

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