

Refugees enjoy freedom to surf – and link-up with family and friends!

For many Refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda, it's a dream come true. They had lost contact with family members and friends and never imagined they would meet again, or at least, not in the near future. They can now afford a smile thanks to a free to user internet facility offered by the Refugee Law Project (RLP).

The internet café was conceived as a strategic intervention to link our clientele in Uganda with family and friends back home and those resettled to other countries, to help them to keep in touch with conditions in their countries of origin, as well as to allow free access to the world-wide web more generally.

Made possible through the generosity of friends of the RLP who dedicated their wedding gifts to establishing the café, the project, which was launched in July 2009 and is housed in the RLP's Information Centre, has become "an exciting opportunity for our clients de-linked from loved ones because of circumstances back home". Moses Alfred Nsubuga, RLP's Information Officer and currently the café's administrator points out, "they can at least chat with relatives and friends and feel at home."

This computer access point uses the thin client computer technology with four computer monitors simultaneously connecting to one central processing unit (CPU). "Since opening we have seen ever increasing usage" says Moses Alfred Nsubuga: "Refugees come here to prepare all kinds of documents, type application letters and curriculum vitae and to read news online about their countries of origin."

On average, 25 clients use the free internet access point daily. "When I learnt of fresh attacks by the rebels in North Kivu province, I would read newspapers on the internet to monitor the situation. I also exchange emails with my brother-in-law to get updates about my family. This café is a blessing because we don't pay money," says one of the clients, a Congolese refugee who prefers to remain anonymous for obvious security reasons.

The majority of users are Congolese, with smaller numbers hailing from Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia. Unfortunately, female clients are still very few with an average of four women using the facility a week. Efforts are underway to encourage more women to use the facility.

The café is open 9am-5pm Monday-Friday and users are given numbers on a first-come first-served basis to avoid commotion. Each user is allowed a maximum of 40 minutes before giving way to another user.

Because of the big response the café has received from refugees and asylum seekers, Refugee Law Project is looking for funds to buy more computers so we can accommodate more of our clients. This will also allow us to dedicate one or more terminals to those who are already pursuing on-line courses in Information Technology (IT). The latter are offered under the Respect University correspondence program and coordinated by RLP's Education and Training department.

While seed money for the internet café was raised through a fundraising drive by a couple who asked guests at their wedding ceremony to donate generously to a noble cause, the internet café's ongoing costs are currently supported by Christian Aid under their ***Power to the People Project***.

Future plans for the café include a dedicated space, and the provision of short courses in basic usage of internet. RLP is also in discussion with Refugees United (www.refunite.org) about facilitating their web-based programme designed to help refugees locate missing or lost relatives through the internet.

For more details about the internet café, how to make donations or to learn about other services offered by the Refugee Law Project, please visit www.refugeelawproject.org. You can also send an email to info@refugeelawproject.org

*RLP welcomes donations of computers and other electronic equipment, new or used but in good condition. We would like to warmly thank a generous individual in the UK who last week donated a barely used professional video camera plus stand to the RLP for the making of our next documentary. This has allowed us to begin filming even as we await responses from potential funders of the overall project. **Please note: All items donated are included on the RLP's assets register and are engraved to minimize the possibility of theft and re-sale.***