

Current News: Parish helps woman fight deportation to the Congo

By Cindy Crebbin and Maryangela Layman Román for the Catholic Herald

HALES CORNERS — While [Regina Bakala](#) awaits her fate from a cell in the Kenosha Detention Center, her supporters have renewed enthusiasm that a new attorney with a different legal approach will allow her to remain in the United States.



Bakala, a 42-year-old wife, mother and member of St. Mary Parish is fighting deportation to the Congo.

FAMILY AWAITS DECISION — David Bakala and his children Lydia and Christopher sit in the living room of their Milwaukee home April 25 holding a family portrait that includes David's wife Regina. On March 22, federal agents appeared at the family's home and took Regina Bakala away in handcuffs. She is being held at the Kenosha County Detention Center, facing deportation to her native Congo.
(Catholic Herald photo by Sam Lucero)

According to School Sister of Notre Dame Josephe Marie Flynn, St. Mary director of adult and family ministry who has been leading the fight to help Regina, a Chicago immigration attorney has been retained to handle her case.

Retaining different counsel has left Sr. Flynn more hopeful than before that Regina's case can be settled to allow her to remain in the United States where she has lived since 1995 when she fled persecution from her country.

The attorney, who Sr. Flynn did not want to name, is the 11th attorney she has approached for assistance. Because of the complexity of the case, the others turned down requests to help. But the new attorney not only agreed to take on the case, but brings a sensitivity, combined with a "pit bull approach," said Sr. Flynn, leaving her hopeful for a positive resolution.

Regina's story began in the Congo where she was orphaned at a young age. Her mother died when she was 9 and after her father died, Regina and her sisters were raised by their uncle. She became a teacher and later a principal in the Congo and also became a grassroots worker for democracy. She joined the P.A.L.U. political party, named after Patrice Lumumba, the first democratic prime minister elected in the Congo. After his assassination, dictator Sese Seko Mobutu assumed power.

While involved in the grassroots political movement, Regina met her future husband, David Bakala, an accountant.

Political activity led to torture

Because of her political activity, Regina was jailed for seven months, beaten and raped, said Sr. Flynn. Occasionally Mobutu had a general release of prisoners and on his birthday in 1994 Regina was among those let go. However nine months later on her way to a political rally, the vehicle she was in was stopped by three soldiers looking for her.

They took her out of the vehicle and gang-raped her. Traumatized, she fled home and with the help of her sisters, received care at a medical clinic. Knowing they were targets of Mobutu, each sister fled to a different country. Sr. Flynn said Regina obtained a fraudulent visitor's visa to come to the United States.

In July 1995, Regina, speaking no English, but fluent French, arrived in North Carolina, settling in an area with other Congolese people. She applied for asylum a few months later, but her hearing was in September of 1997. She was afraid to contact David in Congo because she did not want to jeopardize his situation. Meanwhile David had no idea what had happened to her. For two years, neither knew where the other was.

In 1997, Laurent Kabila overthrew Mobutu and set out to crush opposing parties. War erupted and the United Nations estimates 3.5 million people died. David was slated to be one of them. Because he had been a pro-democracy speaker, he was tortured while awaiting execution. Leaders of his political party in Belgium got him released. On his way to America, he switched planes in Belgium. On the layover he got Regina's phone number from one of her uncles and spoke to his wife for the first time in two years.

Legal troubles begin in North Carolina

Meanwhile, she had lived her own difficult saga. "Her first lawyer said he was not an immigration attorney, but he took her \$4,000 — all the money she had — prepared a flawed affidavit and told her he was not authorized to represent her in an immigration court," said Sr. Flynn. When the translator read back to Regina her small, four-page affidavit, she objected that he had left out the paragraph about being jailed and raped. "She told him you can't leave that out," said Sr. Flynn. "The translator assured her that the affidavit would be changed, so she signed it, trusting it would be."

Though her second lawyer, a pro bono immigration attorney, secured a delay in order to procure more supportive documents to corroborate Regina's testimony, she could get nothing from Congo, now in full-blown war.

"The transcript of Regina's hearing is painful to read. She tries to tell her story, the translator keeps interrupting, and an irritated judge tells her to just answer the questions. In the end, he says her written testimony does not mention the time in

jail and rapes so he concludes that she is making this up on the stand. He rules against her, calling her case “frivolous,” said Sr. Flynn.

With one month to appeal, she hired a third lawyer who met with her only once, prepared the written appeal and submitted it on time. The next month David arrived.

Couple builds new life in Wisconsin

About six years ago, the couple, relocated to Wisconsin and arrived on the doorstep of St. Mary Parish when David, 52, wanted to join his wife and become Catholic. Not only did he participate in the parish’s RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation Program for Adults) but the couple has become active members of the parish. Their children, Lydia Daphene, 5, and Christopher, 4 (Coco), were baptized at the church, and Lydia is a kindergartner at the parish school.

“The Bakala family are wonderful members of our parish. They are very contributing members, who are involved in eucharistic ministry. They are just wonderful, caring, sensitive parents, and Christian people of the Gospel. Faith is very important to them,” said Fr. Art Heinze, St. Mary pastor. They created a new life for themselves in Wisconsin where David works in maintenance for the Sacred Heart School of Theology and Regina, prior to her detention, worked in the development office for the Sacred Heart Fathers.

Typically, said Sr. Flynn, it takes five years or more for the board of appeals to send its written decision to the lawyer who must notify the client. Regina’s decision, issued on May 17, 2002, never reached her. Her lawyer failed to inform immigration officials she had moved her office to another state. When Regina went to renew her work permit late last year, she was astonished to find out what had happened. “Don’t worry,” her lawyer said, “I’ll take care of it.” Nine months later, she filed a motion apologizing for her own negligence and asking for the decision to be sent to her. In less than three weeks, Regina was taken to jail.

Life disrupted during Holy Week

David Bakala described the upheaval of their lives that began on Tuesday of Holy Week when three federal agents appeared at the door of the couple’s Milwaukee home at dinner time.

“They told me to move the children from the kitchen into a closed bedroom,” he said, adding they asked for Regina. As she came out of the shower in her pajamas, they put her in handcuffs. “While she cried, our children rushed from the bedroom. Lydia asked ‘Why are you doing this to my mother,’” recalled David, who was recently on his way to see Regina at the Kenosha Detention Center, where he and the children can talk to her through a partition once week for 30 minutes.

David said Coco reminds him each night that they need to pray for his mother. "We pray every day," said Bakala. "She knows people pray for her. He noted she recently told Sr. Flynn, "I have never felt so loved in my life, not in Belgium, not in the Congo."

Community rallies to support her

Since Regina was forcibly detained, the St. Mary community has rallied around her, hoping to help gain her release.

There has been an out pouring of love and support for the family. School families have been providing three meals a week for the Bakalas.

Sr. Flynn said one school father, Bob Mutranowski took the parish directory and e-mailed every parent asking them to help Regina and the Bakalas. The children held a "jeans day" recently, where instead of uniforms they were allowed to wear jeans by contributing \$2 each to Regina's Defense Fund. From the jeans fund the children raised more than \$4,000. Some parents when they heard of Regina's plight brought in \$100 checks to the school.

On Sunday, May 1 about 300 people attended a rally in support of Regina at the parish. According to Sr. Flynn, an additional \$2,000 was raised that day, bringing the total fund to more than \$10,000. A parent has also created a Web site, www.saveregina.org to provide updates of Regina's plight.

As Sr. Flynn forges ahead, leading the efforts to help Regina, she is bolstered by a memory. Several years ago, she recalled, when Regina was pregnant with Coco, she was working as a nurses aid. She told Sr. Flynn, "Sister, my mother died when I was 9 years old. Her name was Josephine. You are Josephe and God sent you to me."

TAKE ACTION: *For More Information:*

Visit www.saveregina.org

To Send Donations:

The M&I Bank, Attention Regina Bakala Fund
7600 W. Layton Ave., Milwaukee, WI, 53220

To Send Letters of Support:

Deborah Achim
U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement
10 W. Jackson Blvd.
Chicago, IL, 60604-3908

<http://www.archmil.org/news/ShowNews.asp?ID=2278>