

# courage

## Undiminished optimism and enterprise in UNHCR camp despite disability

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*Sahr Kofe hammering away in his new workshop.*

Tobanda Refugee Camp, Sierra Leone. Sahr Kofe was a healthy, active child, no different from the other kids growing up in his village in Lofa County, Liberia. No different, that is, until the day the then eight-year-old encountered a venomous snake. Although not bitten by the creature, young Sahr received such a fright that he mysteriously lost the use of his legs. Despite the efforts of doctors to explain the mystery, they have been paralyzed ever since.

Sahr learned to live with his disability, and managed to live a near-normal life: he worked as a blacksmith's apprentice, married Yawa, a woman from his village, and together they raised five children.

The Kofe family lived peaceably enough until 2002, when the Liberian civil war reached their district, and Sahr realized that he could no longer keep his family safe. Escaping from the intense fighting, they left their village and headed towards the safety of neighbouring Sierra Leone.

Slowly and painfully, the Kofe family struggled to the border. Because Sahr had to drag his useless legs behind him, using only his hands, the journey took

the family five long days instead the normal one. Forced to travel only at certain times of the day, they had to sleep in the bush and eat leaves.

When they finally reached the border, UNHCR staff received and fed them, and then took them to the Tobanda Refugee Camp in eastern Sierra Leone. Thinking back on that moment, Sahr says, "UNHCR has done, and continues to do, many good things for my family and myself." In fact, the family is still there today, waiting for the day when they can return home.

At first life in the camp was very difficult, with just his wife and young children to help, and without the support of his extended family. He soon felt the need to supplement their monthly food ration, which meant finding work.

So Sahr restarted his apprenticeship with a Sierra Leonean blacksmith friend. Slowly he learned to make tools, and began to sell cutlasses and hammers to the other Liberian refugees who started their own small farms around the camp.

Although his profit margin is small, Sahr smiles delightedly as he talks about making his wares in his new "workshop" in front of his mud hut. Built with the help of his sons, it has a bamboo roof, and a floor of soft iron-rich earth that is kind to the hands and knees on which he must get around.

Sahr hopes to return next year. His extended family back home is constructing a small house for him, and when it is complete, he will take his wife and children back to where they belong, and where he will make more tools to help rebuild his beloved Liberia.

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