

PILGRIMAGE TO KAMPALA

Jambo

VICTOR LAVALLE

The logo for Water Tight Services/Pinnacle Security is a giant scorpion over a light blue image of the globe. The company offices are in the wealthy neighbourhood of Bugolobi in Kampala. Because Bugolobi actually sits right alongside a hardcore slum, the homes here are surrounded by high walls and the driveways are blocked by metal fencing. There is always a guard or gatekeeper at these types of homes, no automatic garage door openers. If that guy doesn't come and open the gate, then you are not getting in.

When we drive up to the front gate of Pinnacle Security a young man in a vaguely martial uniform stops our car. The car isn't allowed inside. We have to get out and walk through a small doorway in the fence to enter the grounds. The man in the uniform walks us to the doorway and watches us closely as we step through. He doesn't check our bags for weapons and doesn't seem to be carrying one himself.

Pinnacle Security operates out of a one-storey home, which has about five rooms. It is likely the most modest property for blocks. There are two small lawns inside the compound, separated by a little driveway, where two four-wheel drive trucks are parked. The Pinnacle logo is painted on both trucks. Young men and women are sitting on the lawns here and there, under the shade of the few trees; most of them are filling out paperwork. Three men look down at one sheet of paper and come up with answers by committee. They look up at us quickly – my wife, our guide and me – but lose interest and return to their work. They are filling out job applications.

Inside the home we find a waiting room. There, another half a dozen men sit in chairs familiar to any clinic or dentist's office. The guys look at us and quickly figure out that we are not important. A receptionist sits behind a desk, rifling through paperwork. We introduce ourselves and she makes a call to one of the back offices. A moment later, Gilbert Kwarija comes out to greet us.

'Mr Kwarija,' one of the men waiting says, in a pleading whisper. Gilbert raises his hand to call for patience and the man goes quiet. He frowns, but loses the look quickly and sits back in his chair, gazing ahead patiently.

Gilbert walks us back to his small office. There is a desk with a chair behind it, and three waiting room chairs for us. Two metal filing cabinets, looking decades old, stand against the walls. An open laptop is on Gilbert's desk. It's only thing in the room that looks like it was built in the 21st century.

Gilbert Kwarija is a contractor. The men in the waiting room, along with the men and women outside on the lawns, are prospective employees, hoping they will be lucky enough to be sent by Gilbert to work in Iraq.

Gilbert is handsome and crisply dressed, his hair styled in a tight, professional afro. As we take our seats he leans back in his office chair and crosses his solid arms. His diction is as crisp as his clothes. His eyes are half shut and he smiles faintly, as if he is wary of answering my questions but too confident of his own powers to hide from them. When he speaks, even in greeting us, his voice is oddly soft, just loud enough that you have to lean forward to really hear him. He expects that you would do so.

Gilbert is 30 years old and is the training and business development manager for Water Tight Services/Pinnacle Security. The company is contracted, primarily by the US government, to provide Ugandan nationals to work in support positions on American bases in Iraq. The Ugandans do not do service work, such as food prep or driving buses, because those are handled by other foreign nationals. Instead, Gilbert's company might contract for chemical or electrical engineers, doctors, plumbers or heavy machinery operators. They also supply Ugandans for personal security details, and general security on the American bases.

Some of Gilbert's employees might find themselves in armed conflict situations. No matter what the job, they must know how to use a gun. This is part of the training they receive before being flown out of Uganda. Those who are hired for any kind of security work get further training in firearms and combat proficiency. During our conversation Gilbert sometimes refers to his 'employees', but more often he calls them 'the product'.

These days Iraq is an infamous place to work, so why are Ugandans clamouring to sign up and serve? The answer is simple: money. Gilbert says the US and Britain began contracting with the company in 2005, during the Bush administration. Ugandans were some of the first foreign nationals approached to fulfil these private service contracts. At the time an employee could earn between USD1200 and USD1500 a month. Contracts lasted one or two years. This meant a man or woman, suffering rampant unemployment in Uganda, could work in Iraq for 24 months and return with 25 million, or even 50 million Ugandan shillings – enough money to invest in a home or a new business; enough to entirely change the lives of themselves and their families. These rates have dropped over time, Gilbert says, down to about USD400 to USD500 per month, on average, for Ugandans he contracts. Nevertheless, it is still a good salary compared to they can make at home

'It's business,' Gilbert says. 'It's war business, but it's business.'

Gilbert himself worked in Iraq for two years for Uganda's Department of Defense. He was a sergeant, but he never engaged in combat. Instead he worked as an administrator at the Victory Base Complex, the largest American military base in Baghdad. The worst part of being there, according to Gilbert, was the weather. 'The summer is horrible. I never experienced anything like that. The winter is just as bad.'

He returned to Uganda with a desire to join the private contracting business, seeing the rich opportunities in hiring Ugandans out to trouble spots around the world. In fact, Iraq is far from the end of his interest. The work there isn't going to last all that long. As the Americans pull out of the region, the Ugandans are losing contracts. The Iraqi government has no incentive to hire foreign nationals to support their military because there are enough Iraqis in need of work. So Gilbert has other goals. He is itching for Pinnacle Security to get work in Somalia.

Unlike Iraq, he believes Somalia is an immediate threat to Uganda's safety, whether because of small arms sales - arms that eventually reach and damage Ugandan citizens – or the local terrorists who find safe haven in the country. Somalia is a territory that promises no end of trouble, which spells opportunity for a contractor like Gilbert. When we broach the subject of Somalia, Gilbert leans

forward in his chair with the look of a man indulging in a pleasant fantasy: 'If I got a contract this morning, at 6.30 this evening [the employees] would be at Mogadishu Airport.'

On 11 July, 2010, the night of the World Cup Finals between the Netherlands and Spain, a number of bombs were detonated in Kampala – specifically in two clubs, where locals and tourists had gathered to watch the final match. Seventy-six people were killed. Suspicion was immediately cast on the al-Shabab, a militant Islamic group operating in Somalia. Al-Shabab had reportedly threatened Uganda in the past. In Mogadishu, an al-Shabab commander, Sheik Yusuf Sheik Issa, was quoted by the Associated Press as saying he was happy with these attacks: 'Uganda is one of our enemies. Whatever makes them cry, makes us happy.'

I had spoken to Gilbert, about two weeks before the bombings took place and then his desire to work in Somalia had seemed, to this outsider, like a mercenary move based on greed rather than good sense. But in light of the attacks Gilbert's thinking might have been prescient. The Ugandan president, Yoweri Museveni, has vowed that the nation will now go on the offensive against its enemies in Somalia. Pinnacle Security might be getting those contracts much sooner than even Gilbert imagined.

Ronald Sserwanga was a contracted employee in Iraq. He didn't work for Pinnacle, but for a rival contractor in Uganda, called Dreshak. The general parameters of the work were the same however. Ronald wasn't sent to Baghdad, but to Talil, in northern Iraq, near the border with Syria. He worked at Ali Base, a 43km² American military installation. He signed up for a one-year contract but resigned after nine months. He had been back in Kampala for only three weeks when I met him, the day after I interviewed Gilbert.

Ronald is short, but densely built. Even in a loose rugby shirt and jeans his strength is obvious. He wears a pair of dog tags on a silver chain around his neck. They ring faintly whenever he shifts in his chair. At 25 years of age he has a smooth, young face, but his expression is dispassionate. When I ask him questions he looks me in the eye directly and never turns away. He rarely blinks.

So why did he quit his contract early? His answer is quick. 'Conditions.' When pressed he says it was the heat. Like Gilbert, he found it unbearable. Kampala is a temperate place, sunny but rarely humid. Ronald shakes his head again at the memory of the summer heat in Iraq.

What was his job in Iraq? 'Security specialist.' In other words, he and three other men drove along the fence line of Ali Base in a gun truck, guarding against anyone who might try to scale, snip or blow up the perimeter fencing. One man stayed on the gun while the other three traded off checking for breaches. They worked the night shift. For his entire time in Iraq Ronald worked in the dark. Before leaving Uganda, he received three months of military training, to prepare him for the dangerous nature of the work.

'Sometimes you have fear,' Ronald says. 'But then it becomes a job and you have no fear.'

Did anyone ever get through the fence? 'Twice,' he says, almost casually. Both times the Iraqis broke through to steal supplies, not to launch a direct attack.

I ask Ronald why he signed up for this work. 'I took the job because I had no job,' he says. He has a wife and a child to support. He figured this contract would allow him to save enough to start a bar. He made between \$400 and \$500 per month, he wouldn't say precisely, but it was in the same range Gilbert had mentioned as the current going rate for Ugandans. Ronald has

already started a business with his savings. It is a restaurant – a small fast food joint. ‘I wanted to own a bar,’ he sighs. ‘My wife is a Christian, so no bar.’

So he couldn’t find work in Kampala, he has a family and dreams of being an entrepreneur. And yet here he is, back home, having left the contract three months early. I have a hard time believing that a man like Ronald, who seems both committed and competent, has given up three months pay just to avoid the heat.

Finally he says, ‘I found the Americans...’ He sits quietly, looking at me. ‘Some are friendly, but the friendly are few.’ This is when Ronald introduces me to the term ‘Jambo’ as it is used on the Ali Base. In Kiswahili Jambo is a greeting, like ‘hello’, but on the base Ronald says the American soldiers use it as a blanket term for the Ugandans. As in, ‘those are the Jambos’, ‘Check out the Jambos’ or ‘Here come the Jambos’.

At this point Ronald’s expression doesn’t change, but his posture does. He is hunched forward, his elbows are on his knees. The American soldiers had orders to say hello to everyone on the base, which they always did. But after the greeting they’d refer to the Ugandans as Jambos, or they’d refuse to share seats with them on the buses that shuttle people around the base.

I ask him if the black American soldiers treat them any better than the white soldiers. ‘Only a few,’ he says. ‘Others say, “your grandparents sold my grandparents”’. So, they accused a man from East Africa of having been involved in the West African slave trade? Ronald shrugs. He probably wasn’t in a position to give geography – or basic history – lessons to those black soldiers.

Ronald says that sometimes the Ugandans would strike up relationships with the American servicewomen who came to the base. In those instances, he says, the American servicemen would tell the women that the ‘Jambos have disease, AIDS’.

‘They say that we smell a lot’, he adds.

This was one of the reasons American soldiers apparently refused to share seats on the buses with Ugandans. As bad as it sounds, I have had the same feelings in Kampala. There are rough body odors to be found. Not everywhere, certainly not among everyone, but some folks in Uganda can be damn whiffy. Whenever this thought crosses my mind, while at Owino market – a crowded bazaar – or even when I am dealing with staff at our hotel, I remind myself of conversations I had with Indian friends when I was growing up in Queens, New York. They spoke about coming to the United States and being struck by the overwhelming *dairy* smell emanating from the pores of most Americans. They’d found that pretty gross, too. And I couldn’t blame them. Different diets, different attitudes toward deodorant (not to mention *access* to deodorant or even regular running water) make for different body bouquets. But I actually blame Ronald’s contractor for this miscue. Employees are given months of training, why not an hour on the difference in hygiene?

When Ronald brings up the point about the American soldiers’ attitudes toward Ugandans, he seems more shocked than insulted. I have friends who, when travelling to the Middle East or to parts of Africa, are told they should never shake with the left hand. This is the equivalent of spitting in someone’s eye. So why not look out for Ronald and the other Ugandans in much the same way? This is not meant to excuse the behaviour of American soldiers, but fair is fair.

Another problem with this generally negative relationship between the Americans and Ugandans is that it filters down to some of the other nationalities on the base. Ronald says that some of the Filipinos, who drive the buses that transport people around the base, join in the disrespect aimed at the Ugandans. Ronald mentions one driver in particular, who drives a bus ‘going Southside’ at

Ali Base. Apparently everyone knows the man because he posts a note in big letters on the back of his seat. It reads: 'Jambo don't sit behind me.'

I ask Ronald if the Ugandans ever get into arguments, or even fights, with the American soldiers. He recalls one incident in which a Ugandan got into a screaming match with an American officer. The Ugandan was fired and then a representative from the employer, Dreshak, came to speak with the remaining employees. Ronald says the representative threatened employees: 'If you fight with Americans I'll be waiting for you in Entebbe and arrest you for three months.' Ronald is at pains, however, to make point before we end our conversation: 'We are human beings, we are all the same. We are friendly and we love to be friends with [the Americans]. For us, we have no problem with the Americans.'

I tell him about Gilbert. Ronald knows of Water Tight Services/Pinnacle Security. They are rivals with Dreshak. There are also other contractors in Kampala. And this business is also thriving elsewhere on the continent. 'It's like a competition,' Ronald says.

As he prepares to leave, Ronald mentions his own trip back to Uganda. He flew from Talil to Baghdad, from Baghdad to Entebbe Airport and then travelled home to his family. Before he flew out of Baghdad, he met some new recruits, men from Sierra Leone hired to do the same job he was turning his back on. They would be earning USD200 a month.