

# The Western Desert

**In 2009, the Raapas family, parents and five children, was placed at the Freedom-restricting Centre (VBL) in Ter Apel. The family had been in the Netherlands since 2002, and after having gone through various asylum and regular residency procedures which did not result in a residency status, they ultimately ended up at the VBL.**

My colleagues have been speaking to the Raapas family for two years, and all this time, they have claimed that they come from the Western Desert. The family has also met with a language analyst who determined that the family speaks the same language as the people of Senegal.

After speaking with them for a year, the family is finally convinced that they really must leave the Netherlands because there is no future for them here. To show that they truly do want to leave, they have signed the application form for replacement travel documents, and the application procedure was submitted to the embassy of Senegal. This is why I was so surprised when the family's lawyer told me that the family has submitted a new application for a residence permit with the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND), because they would like to stay in the Netherlands. The mother has diabetes.

Even though they have submitted this application, I will still continue my work. I make an appointment at the Senegalese embassy to apply for the replacement travel documents together with the family. After we arrived and took place in the consul's office, the family announces that they are not really from Senegal, but instead, from the Western Desert. The consul believes the family and will not issue replacement travel documents. At the end of the interview, the consul gives me a tip, advising me to make an appointment at the embassy of The Gambia, as he suspects that the family might be from there.

This means that I have to convince the family to sign a new application form. This time, the form is for replacement travel documents for The Gambia. In March, they are ready to do this, and I can actually make an appointment with The Gambian embassy.

I have two interviews with the family in May, at the time they tell me that they would like to go home. However, it is impossible to get the proper paperwork as they come from Senegal. I explain to them that they can not stay at the VBL longer than 12 weeks, and if they are not gone by then, there is a good chance they will end up on the street. In response to this, the family decides to contact the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to start working on their departure from the Netherlands. They hope that this will prevent them from winding up on the street. They are responsible for their own departure from the Netherlands. They must therefore prove to me that they are in fact doing everything they can to leave the Netherlands, otherwise I have no reason to allow them to live at the VBL any longer.

In the meantime, I have sent the application forms for replacement travel documents to the embassy of The Gambia. In July, Ben Raapas and I go there to meet with the consul. The consul tells us that he will process the application for the replacement travel documents. He will contact us as soon as he knows more...

By October, we still haven't heard anything from the embassy. My colleagues contact the embassy every month to find out if there is any news, but do not receive an answer.

The Raapas family has now been staying at the VBL for six months.

In January of the next year I suddenly receive a letter from the IND. It seems that the family has once again applied for a residence permit due to the mother's diabetes. The previous application was rejected. As the family is allowed to stay in the Netherlands while they wait for the application to be processed (after all, they still haven't heard anything from the embassy of The Gambia), I have no other option than to meet with the family regularly.

During these interviews, I start getting the impression more and more that they really don't want to leave, in spite of their previous promises. In every conversation I have with them, I ask them what sort of action they have taken to ensure they can leave. The family tells me that they cooperated fully with everything, and that they have also been to the IOM and the Dutch Council for Refugees (VWN). However, when all is said and done, during the nine months that they have been staying at the VBL, they have only written one letter to the family in Senegal, and thus not in The Gambia, to ask them to arrange for identity documents for them.

They never received an answer.

One day in February, I was drinking coffee with a colleague who is married to a Rosonian. She tells me that her husband saw Lucas Louares in the Emmen shopping centre. Lucas Louares also lives at the VBL with his family. I have regular interviews with the Louares family. They also say that they are from the Western Desert, just like the Raapas family.

However, Lucas Louares told my colleague's husband something new; he told him that he came to the Netherlands from Dakar in Senegal, together with his brother, Ben Raapas. The husband told my colleague the story of Lucas Louares, not knowing that his wife knows this family from her work.

With this new information at hand, I invited both families to come meet me. I looked up photos of Dakar online (a beautiful old city that is on the UNESCO World Heritage list), printed them, and laid them out on the table. The families deny being related to each other and that it is easier just to tell people that they come from Senegal. After all, no one knows where the Western Desert is!

By now, the Raapas family has been living in the VBL for more than a year. This must come to an end, so I get everything ready to evict the family, putting them out on the street, as soon as I have permission. In a final, last-ditch effort, I ask a colleague if it is possible to apply for replacement travel documents again at the embassy of Senegal. I still haven't heard anything from The Gambian embassy.

I contacted the DT&V's own lawyer as well. I think that I might actually be able to place the father in a Detention Centre for foreign nationals whilst applications are now pending at two embassies. This gives me the possibility to remove the family. The mother and children can stay at the VBL, and the father will go to a Detention Centre. I hope that, once in the Detention Centre, the father will finally truly cooperate with the process of departure from the Netherlands. A week later, I have asked the family to come in for a departure interview, and I told them that I will be asking the Police to place Ben Raapas in a Detention Centre for foreign nationals. In response to this, they tell me that they have once again filed an application

for asylum with the IND, and that they have an appointment in May.

In April, I had the Police place the father, Ben Raapas, in detention. The IND rejected Ben's repeated application for asylum.

In May, the mother, Sandra Raapas, leaves the VBL with her children and has an appointment with the IND. While her application is being processed, she lives at the Application Centre with her children. Several days later, this application too was rejected.

On 4 August, an IOM officer contacts me to tell me that Ben Raapas actually left for Senegal voluntarily. During his stay in the Detention Centre, he did in fact realise he should not be so demanding, and contacted a friend in Senegal. This friend was able to get him identity documents, which Ben was able to use to get a travel document.

This story does not contain details on the whereabouts of his wife and children, but it is likely that they have followed Ben Raapas.