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Shipping a Laptop to a Refugee Camp in Uganda

May 23, 2026

For the last few years, while finally earning my belated Bachelor's Degree in the University of London's World Class program, I've met some amazing people from all across the world, completing their degrees after hours while balancing work, families, and other extremely challenging circumstances.

But few have circumstances as challenging as Django's.

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Shipping a Laptop to a Refugee...

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Mission accomplished

Django is a Congolese refugee living in a camp in Western Uganda. He has no reliable electricity in the camp and runs his laptop on solar power; his internet access comes from Airtel minutes, which he needs to ration on a very limited income. This makes completing a remote Computer Science degree - with video lectures, assignments that need to be uploaded on time and remotely proctored exams - at times seem nearly impossible.

Recently, Django found himself in a new predicament.

His laptop's motherboard burned out after accidentally connecting a USB cable to a 12V battery output, and the next semester was set to start in a few weeks. He had tried to repair it to no avail: the

laptop continued to overheat and would not turn on.



I have a few old MacBooks that are in working order, just sitting around the house. So I offered to send one to him.

Naively, I figured that I'd just go to my local post office, put it in a box with some bubble wrap, and he'd have it in a few days/weeks. However, the process turned out to be far more complicated than expected.

First attempt

I dusted off the laptop, wiped the hard drive and reinstalled macOS using [Apple's instructions](#). I wiped

the screen with a lint-free cloth wetted with only water, avoiding alcohol-based cleaning products. For the keyboard, I used standard multipurpose wipes to remove my ancient finger grime.

I asked ChatGPT how to send the laptop, and it gave me a spiel about finding a reliable freight service or courier. I asked whether it would be possible to send via Australia Post (our national mail service) anyway, since an outlet was down the road from my house.

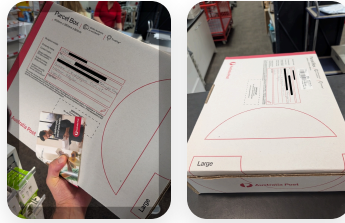
Apparently, I could, as long as the lithium battery was installed in the device.

A few Australia Post-specific points:

- Australia Post allows lithium batteries internationally only when they're installed in the device and packed to the required standard. Damaged or recalled batteries/devices are prohibited.
- Their lithium guide says to use **strong external packaging**, ideally original retail packaging if available, ensure the device **can't accidentally turn on**, and provide protection against breakage/impact.

At the post office, a friendly staff member confirmed it could be sent, helped

me package it up
securely, and it cost
me \$111.60 AUD.

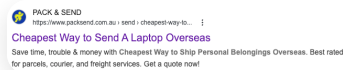


I shared the tracking
number with Django
on April 1st. Six days
later, he messaged
to say it looked like
the package was
arriving soon.

However, a few hours
later, I got a knock at
my door. The package
had been returned to
my house after
failing to be
processed at the
distribution centre.

Turns out Australia
Post won't ship
devices containing
lithium batteries
internationally by air,
after all. I should
have listened to
ChatGPT.

I searched for how to actually send a laptop overseas, and a few freight services with well-tuned SEO popped up. I found a vendor called Pack & Send with an office a few km from my house.



I submitted a quote request on their website, and they called me back with a quote of \$213 AUD.

I walked about 45 minutes to the office, in a neighbouring industrial suburb.

The woman at the front desk laughed at the packaging job I had done at the Post Office and said she'd repackage it properly.

This was April 9th, which was about 6 weeks into the Strait of Hormuz crisis, which had thrown global freight routes into chaos, so she

told me to expect delays. She also mentioned there would be additional costs for Django in Uganda: customs fees and taxes she couldn't estimate, and that he would need a buffer of at least \$50–100 on his end.

Since money was extremely tight on Django's end, I offered to send some for the buffer. Most Ugandan services accept Airtel Money, which I knew could be transferred easily via the [WorldRemit app](#). He received the money in about 5 minutes.

Clearing Ugandan customs

Over the next few days, the package made its way through nine countries before reaching the Netherlands.

Then, on April 15th, Django received an email from an EHS Africa Logistics Agent with instructions on the next step: there was an agency fee of UGX 95,000 (~\$35 AUD), then he'd need to register via the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) Portal, complete a tax assessment, and pay any applicable taxes. All of this had to be cleared within 5 working days, or we would be paying storage fees, the agent warned.

However, registration required a Tax Identification Number (TIN), which Django, a refugee, does not have.

Getting one requires physically presenting at a URA office, and there was none nearby in his district.

Django sent an email to the EHS rep asking if it could be completed without a

TIN, but received no reply. So he decided to sort it himself.

Getting a TIN as a refugee

In his words:

Regarding the TIN, I first tried to do it online because the URA website suggested that the process could be started electronically. However, I discovered that for refugees and non-citizens, it was not truly an online process. Ugandan citizens could complete everything online, but refugees could only begin the application online and then had to physically appear at a URA office with documents for verification before approval.

Even starting the online part was

difficult. The application form was an old Excel macro form that could not properly work on my phone. At that time, I did not yet have a computer, so there was practically no way for me to complete or upload the form myself.

I then went to a nearby organization that says it assists refugee youth. They told me they could help fill and submit the form, but they asked me for the equivalent of about 20 USD just to complete the submission process, and they also told me the process could take around two weeks. At another point, I was even told an amount closer to 40 USD. The difficult part was that this was not even the full service - after paying, I would still have to personally travel to a

URA office for
physical verification.

Since I urgently
needed the TIN for
customs clearance, I
decided to do the rest
myself instead of
waiting.

From my area in the
refugee settlement, I
first walked for about
two hours to reach a
trading center
"Bukere" where I
could get a boda-
boda motorcycle.
From there, I
travelled to the main
road in "Kyegegwa"
and boarded a public
taxi/bus to another
town, "Mubende",
where there was a
URA office. The taxi
constantly stopped
along the road
picking up
passengers, so the
trip took around
three hours.

When I reached the
town, I first went to a
police station to ask
for directions
because I did not

know where the URA office was located. A boda-boda rider was then called to take me there.

At the URA office, I was told that I needed to return all the way back to the refugee settlement and obtain a local authorization letter from the camp leadership before they could process my request. That day was a Friday. I explained repeatedly that I had travelled from very far away, using money that had originally been sent for the laptop clearance process itself, and that returning on Monday would be extremely difficult for me. But they continued insisting.

At some point, one man quietly pulled me aside and suggested that if I "gave something," they could help solve

the problem more easily. I refused. After some time, another officer finally agreed to look at my documents. However, after opening the file, he told me that "the network was down" and that I should come back on Monday.

He then told me to walk around town for one or two hours and come back later to check whether the network had returned. I did exactly that. When I returned, he again told me the network was still unavailable. So I remained sitting there in the office area for hours.

What made the situation painful was that while I was being told the network was not working, I could clearly see other people arriving, being served normally, and leaving. Many were speaking local

languages, while I was struggling to explain myself in English and repeatedly trying to convince them that I had nowhere else to go and no money for repeated journeys.

After waiting several more hours, I approached again and asked whether they could please try once more. At that point, the same officer suddenly reopened the file and completed the entire process in only a few minutes. The actual generation and printing of the TIN certificate took less than ten minutes.

What had taken nearly two full days of travelling, waiting, stress, negotiation, and indirect requests for unofficial payments was finally completed in a matter of minutes.

When I finally received the printed TIN certificate, I was honestly overwhelmed with relief and gratitude. Before leaving, I found myself individually thanking almost everyone in the office - including some of the people who had initially refused to help me - simply because, after everything, I was deeply relieved that the process was finally over.

- Django

With the TIN in hand, Django could finally complete the Agent Appointment in the URA Portal and the tax worksheet. Taxes totalled UGX 127,657.76 (~\$47 AUD), bringing the running total — including the failed Australia Post attempt — to ~\$407

AUD, already close to the laptop's value.

That was April 17th - three days before the new semester was due to start, with the laptop still sitting in the Netherlands.

Laptop seizure

The package next travelled to **France** → **UK** and finally to **Uganda**. However, we received a notice that there were "delivery restrictions".



This caused the package to re-route through: **UK** → **UAE** → **Kenya** → **Uganda**.

Finally, on May 6th, it was in Uganda. But there was a new problem.

According to Ugandan regulations, used laptops cannot be imported unless accompanied by an

original purchase receipt showing the exact purchase price. A customs invoice indicating an estimated value and noting that the laptop is used was not sufficient. Customs temporarily seized it.

We were told FedEx were in contact with the authorities to resolve the situation and were awaiting official communication from customs specifying the additional payment required. However, EHS informed us their system was down, causing further delays.

Meanwhile, Django managed to borrow a laptop for a small daily fee, so he could start the semester while waiting.

After some convincing, the authorities accepted

a confirmation that the laptop was a used gift. The EHS representative requested a top-up payment of UGX 50,000 (~\$18.50 AUD) to submit the amendment.

Dear @Django,
Please find attached query. Top-up to be paid is 50,000+ kindly approve and we submit to customs for amendment.

Django paid on May 8th. A day later, the shipment was released from customs and marked ready for delivery.

Dear @Django,
Your shipment has been released from customs and is ready for delivery. Thank you for choosing EHS Logistics / FedEx. We look forward to serving you once again.

The final tally:

| Expense | AUD | UGX |
|---------------------------------|----------|---------|
| Australia Post (failed attempt) | \$111.60 | - |
| Pack & Send courier | \$213.00 | - |
| Ugandan agency fee | ~\$35.00 | 95,000 |
| URA customs taxes | ~\$47.00 | 127,658 |

| Expense | AUD | UGX |
|--------------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Customs amendment top-up | ~\$18.50 | 50,000 |
| Total | ~\$426 | ~1,163,832 |

Finding the laptop in a hardware store

We received a notification that the laptop was out for delivery in Kampala, already about a 4-hour drive from Django's home. He followed up and was told it had gone to Mbale - east of Kampala, and even further from him. Then he was told to wait until Thursday, the 14th, another 4 days away.

Meanwhile, the tracking showed an Attempt Failure.



So Django took matters into his own hands. In his words:

Since the tracking information was no longer reliable, I started tracing back through the different phone numbers that had previously called me regarding the shipment.

Some of those numbers no longer answered.

Eventually, I called a woman from another town who had earlier contacted me when the laptop had temporarily passed through her hands. At that stage, the tracking system had described the shipment as being with a "third-party trusted delivery agent."

She explained that she no longer had possession of it and then gave me

another phone
number to call.

I called the new
number, and the man
told me that the
shipment had
already been passed
again to yet another
delivery person. I
asked him when I
should expect to
receive it, and he
simply replied, "They
will call you."

After some time, I
called him back. He
said that the delivery
people were already
supposed to have
contacted me by
then. But instead of
receiving a proper
call, I only received a
missed call from a
new number.

I immediately called
them back. The man
who answered told
me that he was
"about to find any
boda-boda rider" and
simply give him the
laptop together with
some transport
money so that the

rider could bring it to me.

I asked him where exactly he was and whether he personally knew the boda-boda rider he intended to trust with the shipment. His answer was essentially that he would just stop any passing motorcycle rider and hand over the package.

At first, I tried to accept the situation calmly. But after a few minutes, I suddenly realized the reality of what was happening: my laptop, which had already crossed oceans and multiple customs stages, was now about to be handed to a completely random motorcycle rider by a man whose full identity I did not even know myself.

That was the moment I decided I

could not continue
waiting passively
anymore.

I immediately called
him back and told
him not to hand the
package to anyone
else. I asked him to
tell me exactly where
he was so that I could
come personally and
collect it myself.

The moment I
received the location,
I left immediately. I
did not even stop to
change properly; I
was still wearing
sandals. I rushed to
find a boda-boda
motorcycle and
began travelling
toward the location
as quickly as possible.

About three hours
later, I finally arrived
at the place where
the laptop was
supposedly waiting
for me.

But when I reached
the petrol station
that had been
described to me over
the phone, there was

no obvious delivery office, no courier sign, and no person visibly waiting with a package.

So I called the man again.

After several minutes of walking and phone communication, I finally reached a small hardware business they had described. This was not a delivery office. It was an ordinary hardware shop filled with metal materials, construction tools, and iron equipment. Outside, people were welding metal doors and iron structures. There was nothing there suggesting electronics, parcels, or courier services.

Then, to my complete surprise, the hardware shop owner climbed onto a shelf among the metal equipment and pulled out a cardboard box that

had been sitting
there between
hardware items and
iron materials.

That box was
my laptop.

I remember standing
there almost unable
to process the
situation. A MacBook
that had travelled
internationally,
passed through
customs procedures,
taxes, agency
clearances, and
multiple transport
stages was now
resting quietly on a
dusty hardware shelf
beside welding
equipment.

Before leaving, I
asked him whether
he even knew what
was inside the
package. He
answered very
casually that he had
no idea and that he
did not need to know.
I then asked whether
he at least knew
which company had
entrusted him with

the delivery. He replied that it was simply "a friend" who had asked him to temporarily keep the box until someone came to collect it.

So right there, inside a hardware shop surrounded by iron bars, metal dust, and welding sparks, I finally opened the box.

And there it was.

The MacBook had survived the entire journey.

I switched it on briefly, and that was actually the moment when the hardware shop owner himself suddenly became excited. Until then, he had apparently not known what kind of item he had been storing on his shelf. Seeing the Apple logo appear on the screen, he immediately smiled and said something along the lines of, "Ah..."

a MacBook is a
MacBook. Apple is
still Apple."

At that moment,
after all the stress,
uncertainty,
travelling, delays,
calls, negotiations,
and confusion, the
atmosphere
completely changed.

We shook hands,
laughed, and
genuinely celebrated
the fact that the
laptop had finally
arrived safely.

Interestingly, even
after I had physically
received the laptop,
the electronic
tracking system still
had not properly
updated to show that
the shipment had
been delivered.

- Django

Mission accomplished

On his way home,
Django sent me

this email:

Dear Lex,

I am very happy to let you know that I have finally received the shipment safely. I turned it on, and everything appears to be working properly.

At the moment, I am still on my way back home and not yet fully settled, but I wanted to send this message immediately to let you know that it has safely reached me.

Honestly, after finally receiving it, I felt that all the trouble and effort were worth it. Earlier, we had talked about how expensive the whole process seemed and how it might have been easier to buy something locally instead. But once I held it in my hands,

even the person
helping me and I
both reached the
same conclusion: an
Apple is still an Apple.

This is my first Apple
device in my life, and
now I truly
understand why
people speak so
highly about it.

Thank you very much
again, Lex. I truly
appreciate your
kindness, patience,
and support
throughout this
journey.

Kind regards,

Django

Finally, on May 13th,
after ~36,000 km
across 12 countries
over 42 days, the
laptop had arrived.



Comments

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to join the
conversation.
