

# Reintegration challenges for Burundi

compiled by the FMR editors

*The Burundi government and the international community have failed to recognise the scale of the problems to be overcome in order to ensure the sustainable return and resettlement of refugees and IDPs.*

Since the assassination in 1993 of Burundi's first democratically elected leader it is estimated that 300,000 Burundians have died as a result of conflict between the government and Hutu rebel groups seeking to put an end to the political dominance of the Tutsi minority. One in seven Burundians has been forced to leave home. Some 800,000 fled abroad, primarily to Tanzania. Many others, predominantly Hutus, were forcibly displaced ('regrouped', according to the language of social engineering employed by the Tutsi-dominated government) into squalid camps.<sup>1</sup>

Prospects for the return of IDPs improved significantly at the end of 2003, following the signing in the Tanzanian city of Arusha of cease-fire agreements between the government and several rebel groups. At the same time, however, more people were displaced in Bujumbura Rural Province in the first months of 2004, as one rebel group, the Forces National de Liberation (FNL), refused to join the transitional power-sharing arrangement brokered by South Africa. With the overall increase of stability in the rest of the country, however, thousands of IDPs and refugees are returning home. The first soldiers of a UN peacekeeping force are being deployed.

## Refugee and IDP return

According to UNHCR a total of 52,307 Burundian refugees have returned home from Tanzania since the beginning of this year, bringing returnee numbers since 2002 to 187,956. Even though return is 'voluntary', poor living conditions in the camps in Tanzania and active, if not coercive, encouragement by local Tanzanian authorities are clear push factors. Many repatriating Burundian refugees risk becoming IDPs upon their return as a result of ongoing insecurity.

*Mkugwa refugee camp in Tanzania*

By April 2004, the number of people in IDP sites - over 281,000 in mid 2003 - had halved. IDPs are returning because of improvement in security, in particular in the southern provinces that had experienced severe outbreaks of conflict. Some IDPs in the northern parts of Burundi - such as in Muyinga, a province where there were many civilian-led massacres in 1993 - think differently. Many are afraid of their former neighbours and prefer to settle down in their area of refuge, rather than return to their hills of origin.

## Reintegration

While some IDPs wish to return home others prefer to continue to live in the special IDP sites. This raises the complex issue of whether the latter should be resettled in new sites in their areas of origin or whether existing IDP sites should be transformed into permanent villages. If the plans of the National Commission for the Rehabilitation of Disaster-affected People (CNRS) are implemented there is a risk of creating mono-ethnic segregated villages.

Land is in chronically short supply in Burundi - after neighbouring

Rwanda, it is Africa's most densely populated country. The vast majority of returnees and IDPs are dependent on agriculture for their survival. But with less than one hectare per person, there are grave doubts whether agriculture can viably sustain economic recovery.

Most IDPs and returnees will return to areas which have been severely affected by the war - lacking infrastructure and having suffered considerable damage to property. The Arusha peace agreement calls for the establishment of a compensation fund for the victims of the war, in particular for returnees and IDPs. At present, this fund does not exist because of a lack of money. Some assistance is given on an *ad hoc* basis, such as provision of iron sheets for roofing.

While the rest of Burundi is finally at peace, the situation in Bujumbura Rural, the province surrounding the capital, is very different. With persistent insecurity, and the presence of an active armed group, the provincial administration has no means to prevent displacement or work actively for the return and the reintegration of IDPs. With conflict continuing between the government's armed forces and the FNL, there has been a huge wave of new displacement - with currently some 50,000 people being newly displaced each month. Human Rights Watch alleges that both Burundian leaders and international actors are





so intent on pushing along a halting peace process that they are doing little about the ongoing military activities, recruitment and violations of international humanitarian law by all combatants in Bujumbura Rural.<sup>2</sup> IDPs in the most affected area in Bujumbura Rural - Kabezi - experience cyclic and repetitive displacements, in general lasting a month.

Janvier, Desiré and Vianney are three young men aged between 24 and 28. They live in Bujumbura Rural. They cannot remember how often they have been forced to leave their homes since the war started, nor how many times they have fled in 2004. Vianney tells what often happens: *"The people in my village take turns to conduct rounds at night. If for instance FNL has passed through the area in search for provisions or to conduct an attack, the women wake up their families and all the villagers flee before the army raids the area. They all believe that they will be killed if they stay. Often, when we return, houses have been burned or destroyed, and iron sheets and doors, as well as personal belongings, are stolen."* Grain stores are regularly destroyed or looted.

### Uncertain future

Burundi is faced with the enormous challenge of reintegrating 1.2 million refugees, IDPs and demobilised soldiers, around 20% of the population of this chronically poor country. As the number of returnees grows, the Burundian government and the international

community must do more to ensure their effective reintegration. Major obstacles remain:

- Some armed groups have not signed the cease-fire agreement.
- Disarmament and demobilisation of ex-combatants are progressing but not the more important issue of integrating former rebels into the national army: the World Bank-backed disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process (DDR) is faced with political obstacles.
- Antipersonnel mines planted by both rebel groups and government troops remain uncleared and there is a low level of mines awareness.
- Funding shortages, and a switch to support of programmes to resettle refugees, have led to reduction in assistance provided by international actors and local NGOs to the 140,000 people still living in IDP camps.
- The international community has not provided sufficient financial resources to establish mechanisms to support sustainable reintegration.
- Many rural families remain so poor that they have no mechanisms for coping with food insecurity: malnutrition rates are rising.
- Income generation schemes to enable rural people to diversify their livelihoods have not been established.
- The CNRS is not administratively and financially independent and lacks resources and capacity:

with only 21 staff members, it has had to focus its action principally on the returning refugees, to the detriment of the internally displaced.

- The transitional government and international community have failed to address the land issue: they need to establish land tribunals, clarify compensation criteria for expropriated families, set up compensation mechanisms and guarantee the land rights of widows.
- Communities affected by displacement are not being consulted about their futures.
- There is lack of clarity concerning international institutional responsibility for IDP issues: as UNHCR focuses on returning refugees, the UN country team has not demarcated which agency has lead responsibility for providing material assistance and protection to reintegrating IDPs.

### *Impunity casts a long shadow over the return and reintegration process*

- There are growing fears that elections, scheduled under the Arusha agreement to be held before November 2004, will again provoke ethnic divisions.

Impunity casts a long shadow over the return and reintegration process. The Burundian military and opposition forces who committed serious war crimes, including civilian killings and rapes, have been given immunity from prosecution. In the absence of mechanisms to bring to justice those whose violent crimes caused their flight, and widespread problems of banditry, many are deterred from returning or fear future encounters with their assailants. Those displaced by violence in Burundi want to see justice done and the rebuilding of their country.

***This article has been prepared with the assistance of the Norwegian Refugee Council. Information about NRC's Burundi programme is at [www.nrc.no/NRC/eng/programmes/Burundi.htm](http://www.nrc.no/NRC/eng/programmes/Burundi.htm)***

<sup>1</sup> See Susan Martin, *Burundi: Out of sight, out of mind*, FMR17, [www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR17/fmr17.10.pdf](http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR17/fmr17.10.pdf) and the Global IDP Project's Burundi reports at: [www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/idpSurvey.nsf/wCountries/Burundi](http://www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/idpSurvey.nsf/wCountries/Burundi)

<sup>2</sup> See [hrw.org/backgrounder/africa/burundi/2004/index.htm](http://hrw.org/backgrounder/africa/burundi/2004/index.htm)