

Burundi: sliding off the humanitarian radar screen?

by Tom Delrue

As Burundi faces its greatest challenges since the violence in 1993 that cost 300,000 lives, the way it manages the return and reintegration of IDPs and refugees will be a determining factor for the success of its transition to peace.



Martti Lintunen/ACT International

Andre Chomba shows his new election card - his only official proof of identity. He lost his wife and four of his eight children in the war. "But I'm not so much afraid of the soldiers and fighting anymore. I am more worried whether we will have the strength and commitment to rebuild our lives."

From the early 1990s, hundreds of thousands of Burundians fled their homes to escape fighting between the government and Hutu rebel groups seeking to put an end to the political dominance of the Tutsi minority. Many others, predominantly Hutus, were forcibly displaced into camps by the government in the second half of the 1990s. The number of IDPs peaked in 1999, with over 800,000 displaced, 12% of the population. Several hundred thousand IDPs and refugees have returned home since 2003, following the general improvement of security after the signing of ceasefire agreements between the government and several rebel groups. Most recent UN estimates put the number of Burundian refugees at around 400,000 (200,000 refugees in camps and 200,000 others in villages/settlements) and the number of IDPs (mainly Tutsis) at 117,000.

The success of Burundi's transition to peace hinges on how its new

government (elected in August 2005 and headed by former rebel leader Pierre Nkurunziza) and the international community deal with such post-displacement issues as land and property claims, reconciliation and transitional justice.

The link between displacement, return, reconciliation and successful transition towards a consolidated peace is frequently either underestimated or neglected by the international community. It is often driven by the media as focus switches to other crises and consolidation of fragile peace and sufficient investment in early recovery are ignored. All too often the international community sees democratic elections and the installation of a new government as offering an exit strategy. Instead, this should be a trigger for the international community to provide all necessary support – for socio-economic development, reconciliation and transitional justice – in order to avoid the need for new humanitarian interventions some years later.

Following the decision of the Tripartite Commission on the Voluntary Repatriation of Burundian Refugees in Tanzania to move from facilitation of return to promotion of return, UNHCR started promoting return in the refugee camps in Tanzania in June this year. It remains unclear whether the refugees will consider it safe enough to return. With widespread poverty and illiteracy, rapid spread of HIV/AIDS, high infant mortality rates, insufficient delivery of social services (especially in health and education), a large degree of impunity for perpetrators following the 1993 events and the absence of a reconciliation process, there is little to motivate return.

Risk of renewed conflict

Unresolved issues risk reactivating conflict. Hundreds of thousands of small arms are in circulation in Burundi.² Lack of housing and unresolved land and property rights issues deter IDPs and refugees from returning to their place of origin and are a major potential threat to future stability.

Several waves of displacement have resulted in complex and politically sensitive issues around land and property. In some cases IDPs and returning refugees have occupied land abandoned by those who fled conflict. Over the years, IDP sites have grown into village-like settlements. Many are on state-owned, private or church-owned property and have insufficient land for cultivation. The status of the IDPs on these properties remains unclear and this has led to conflicts with original owners, many of them returnees. Some new owners are speculating with the land for commercial gain. This is a potential source of tension, especially where under-utilised plots are located in areas of land scarcity. Burundi is one of Africa's most densely populated countries. Some 90% of the population depends directly on agriculture for survival. Existing land scarcity will be exacerbated if current demographic growth continues and if the remaining Burundian refugees abroad decide to return. It is therefore imperative to establish a proper and equitable system of resolving land and property issues. Most conflicts in Burundi are property-related and the judicial system lacks either the resources or legislation to deal with massive returns.³

The Burundian government is developing a national policy for internal displacement that should clarify the status of sites for IDPs. Either the current situation will be formalised and those unable to return home will be allowed to integrate on a permanent basis, or

they will be given the opportunity to relocate elsewhere in new villages.

Nobody expects the 400,000 Burundian refugees in neighbouring countries – mainly Tanzania – to return immediately. However, UNHCR's return campaign, the end of the school year and the renewed commitment to continue peace talks between the government and the FNL – the most hardline Hutu group – might result in a large number of returnees. Does the government have the institutional capacity to cope with a substantial influx of returning refugees? The government is currently proposing to keep returnees without land or references in transit sites but this might well result in increased tensions. Returning refugees unable to recover their property will be forced to stay with families and risk becoming themselves internally displaced.

Reconciliation and peace building

Conflict and displacement inflict lasting wounds on individuals and communities which may take generations to heal, if they heal at all. Reconciliation efforts are essential to help the healing process. The vast majority of IDPs state that their preferred durable solution is return – but only on condition of an accompanying reconciliation process.

The release in January 2006 of 673 prisoners who had been incarcerated in connection with the violence that followed the 1993 assassination of President Melchior Ndadaye does not foster a climate for return and reintegration. Several IDPs risk being confronted by former criminals against whom they provided evidence. The released prisoners were granted provisional immunity while waiting to appear before a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

UN Security Council Resolution 1606 of 20 June 2005 called for negotiations for the establishment of a truth commission and a special chamber in the Burundian court system. Despite preparatory talks in late 2005 between the UN Operations in Burundi (ONUB)⁴ and the Burundian government, no such commission or special chamber has been established.

In order to address current and potential sources of tension – and to prevent new waves of displacement – urgent attention must be paid to:

- establishing a truth commission
- re-activating the existing 'welcome committees' in places of origin
- ensuring that the international community – in both emergency and recovery phases – acknowledges and builds on the links between peace building, conflict resolution, cross-community building and judicial issues, and the return and reintegration of IDPs and returned refugees.

All too often a fragile and incomplete peace is simply the prelude to renewed armed conflict. In June 2006 the UN inaugurated a Peacebuilding Commission⁵ – currently chaired by former UN Special Representative to Burundi Caroline McAskie – to help reconstruct countries after conflict and ensure sustainable peace. The Commission aims to:

- propose integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery
- help ensure predictable financing for early recovery activities and sustained financial investment over the medium to longer term
- extend the period of attention by the international community to post-conflict recovery
- develop best practices on issues that require extensive collaboration among political, military, humanitarian and development actors.

Given the importance of ensuring a well-managed peace-building and reconciliation process which takes full account of displacement-related issues, Burundi could be an excellent test case for the Commission.

Tom Delrue is Field Response Officer at OCHA (<http://ochaonline.un.org>). Email: delruet@un.org

This article is written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily represent the views of the UN.

The International Crisis Group has called for:

- prioritising highly visible projects to give Burundians confidence that peace has its benefits and to provide job opportunities for ex-combatants, refugees and unemployed civilians alike
- applying pressure on donors to meet their commitments: of \$1.1 billion pledged to Burundi by donors since 2000, only 66% has been disbursed.
- building an effective legislature and judiciary and creating a culture of accountability, transparency and respect for human rights in government
- encouraging accountability by rebuilding respect for rule of law and eliminating a culture of impunity
- rebuilding civil society
- assisting land reform and resettlement by provision of legal, technical and financial assistance (paying particular attention to the rights of women)
- financing programmes to reintegrate ex-combatants into society.

Taken from articles by Gareth Evans, president of the International Crisis Group www.crisisgroup.org Full text of articles at: www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3895&l=1 and www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3903&l=1

1. See Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre report www.internal-displacement.org/countries/burundi

2. 'Guns Out of Control: the continuing threat of small arms', IRIN, May 2006, www.irinnews.org/webspecials/small-arms/default.asp

3. See International Crisis Group, 'Réfugiés et Déplacés au Burundi – Désamorcer la Bombe Foncier', *Africa Report No. 70*, Oct 2003 and *From the Ground Up: Land Rights, Conflict and Peace in Sub-Saharan Africa*, edited by Chris Huggins and Jenny Clover, June 2005, African Centre for Technology Studies, www.acts.or.ke

4. www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/onub/ The new government has requested ONUB to withdraw by December 2006. See also *United Nations Operation in Burundi (ONUB) - Political and Strategic Lessons Learned*, July 2006, <http://pbpu.unlb.org/pbpu/view/viewdocument.aspx?id=2&docid=796>

5. www.un.org/peace/peacebuilding