

Burundi: seven years of refugee return

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Before UNHCR started its facilitated return programme in spring 2002 Burundi ranked second (after Afghanistan) in UNHCR's global 'country of origin' statistics, despite its small size. With the return of half a million refugees and the majority of the country's 375,000 internally displaced persons since then, the war-ravaged country of some eight million people has had to reintegrate about 10% of its population. Refugee return has taken place mostly to rural areas in border provinces, in a context of widespread poverty, lack of basic infrastructure and scarcity of land. To gain better information on the situation of returned refugees, UNHCR set up a country-wide returnee monitoring scheme. This, and a number of assessments organised with partners, generated the following conclusions.

Firstly, the great majority of returnees do not face protection problems specific to their status as returnees, and discrimination against them hardly occurs. They usually return to their hills (collines), where they are supported by their family, clan or other community members. With regards to socio-economic reintegration, the situation of returnees who have access to agricultural land and who returned several years ago is the same as that of the resident population.

Secondly, some observers have questioned the sustainability of return due to the dire socio-economic prospects in key return communes. In the main communes of return, the population has increased by an estimated 50% since 2002. In the longer term, support in these regions needs to target the communities at large and not returnees in particular.

Thirdly, land tenure conflicts involving returnees are on the rise, particularly since UNHCR began to facilitate in 2008 the return of former refugees from 1972 from Tanzania's 'Old Settlements'. By early July 2009 some 41,000 refugees from the 1972 caseload had returned. Even though this is less than 10% of the total number of returnees, their arrival has attracted significant attention from humanitarian actors. The Government of Burundi, UNHCR and other agencies have responded to the rise in land disputes by increasing support for land conflict mediation, resulting in solutions such as land sharing. While these combined efforts have already resolved thousands of cases, the land issue remains a risk factor in terms of successful reintegration and peaceful cohabitation particularly in southern Burundi. Its resolution is all the more pressing in the run-up to the national elections in 2010.

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1. See <http://tinyurl.com/OCHAGLFeb2002>.

