

Burundi: out of sight, out of mind?

by Susan Martin

Since the early 1970s, conflict in Burundi has caused more than 200,000 Burundians to lose their lives, many to flee abroad and many more to be displaced, some temporarily and some more long term.

There are approximately 639,000 Burundian refugees in neighbouring countries, plus a further 200,000 living in Tanzanian settlements since 1972.¹ As of November 2002, there were approximately 380,000 IDPs living in camps for IDPs and an unknown number of men, women, adolescents and children who are otherwise dispersed in Burundi. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that the current conflict may be generating as many as 100,000 new displacements each month.²

In 1998, negotiations for peace were initiated. In August 2000, a Peace Agreement was signed by most, but significantly not all, of the parties to the conflict.³ No cease-fire was agreed upon although negotiations for a cease-fire continue. The peace agreement remains fragile and could collapse at any time. Civilians continue to be caught in the middle and the number of deaths continues to rise. Both rebel forces and extremists within the Burundi military are implicated in attacks against civilians and humanitarian aid organisations. Regional instability and conflict also complicate prospects for peace in Burundi.

Broadly, three categories of IDPs, with some movement between the categories, are referred to in Burundi: the displaced in IDP camps, the regrouped in regroupment or former regroupment camps (camps established when the military removed the local population to facilitate their military operations) and the dispersed who do not live in camps but in the forests and marshes or with relatives or friends. In addition, some refugee returnees have subsequently become internally displaced. Urban street children and other homeless populations have grown in size because of the conflict although they tend not be considered IDPs.

The situation of the regrouped best illustrates the challenges in Burundi of determining when displacement ends. Regroupment has been a tool of the Burundian government since 1996 when about 300,000 persons, mainly Hutu, were forced into camps, ostensibly for their own protection. Most of these camps closed in 1998 but the last quarter of 1999 saw the creation again of regroupment camps, officially termed 'protection sites'. Conditions inside the camps were for the most part appalling and some of the camps were inaccessible to humanitarian agencies.⁴ Women and children were especially vulnerable when food was short; at food distributions they were often sidelined, sometimes despite efforts of distribution agencies.⁵ There were also reports of the rape and sexual abuse of women and young girls in the camps.⁶

There was almost universal condemnation of the camps and extensive calls for their closure. Most were dismantled in the third quarter of 2000 following pressure from Nelson Mandela, the international community and local organisations.⁷ The final pressure came from the rebel groups who made closure of the camps a precondition for joining the peace negotiations. The camp closures occurred within a very short period and with no preparation for the safe return of the regrouped. Some camps were closed very quickly, either because the authorities wanted them emptied as fast as possible but more often because as soon as the camp population was allowed to leave they did, despite the risks and conditions they then faced.



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When the regrouped population left the camps, many faced serious risk. Fighting continued or even intensified in many areas to which the regrouped returned. While the international community rightly demanded the closure of the camps, neither they nor the government made adequate preparations for this contingency. The location of most of the formerly regrouped population remains vague. Many appear to have gone home but others are believed to still be living in or near regroupment camps. Still others are likely to have moved to Bujumbura or other parts of the country. No statistics are available on the relative size of each group.

Internment camp for Hutu IDPs in Cashikanwa area, Burundi

For those who were able to return home, life has been far from secure. The homes and livestock of many have been looted or destroyed in whole or in part. In some areas the water system has been destroyed. Insecurity due to rebel and/or military activity remains a real threat both for those previously regrouped and those wishing to assist them. It is commonly reported that formerly regrouped IDPs return home only to be forced to flee from their homes to escape attacks from one or the other side of

the conflict. The humanitarian agencies that provided the minimal assistance allowed in the regroupment camps generally were unable to accompany the regrouped to their homes because of the unsafe conditions.

Security is the principal constraint on assistance and protection to IDPs in Burundi. As the peace process has progressed, the fighting has in fact increased and continues to this day. Since aid operations have been directly targeted, it has been particularly difficult to reach vulnerable populations. A further impediment to effective humanitarian assistance to IDPs and other war-affected populations has been the weakness of the UN in Burundi, particularly after the murders of several senior UN staff in 1999.

The deterioration in the security situation inside the country and the

inability to forecast when peace will be established and what will happen in the meantime have made operating conditions for humanitarian aid agencies particularly difficult. Too often, aid agencies are unable to reach displaced populations because of the security barriers, effectively ending assistance and protection though not the displacement itself. Burundi epitomises the worst way in which displacement as an issue of international concern comes to end – when the internally displaced are out of sight and hence out of mind of international actors.

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1. UN OCHA, Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for Burundi 2003, November 2002. www.reliefweb.int/appeals/2003/files/bur03.pdf
2. Norwegian Refugee Council, Burundians Flee Raging Conflict, 12 February 2003 (www.idproject.org/)
3. Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi, Arusha, 28 August 2000, referred to as the Peace Agreement in this article.
4. Refugees International, *Burundian Regroupment Camps: A Man-made Humanitarian Emergency, an Impediment to Peace*, 20 January 2000, and *Conditions in Burundian Camps Rapidly Deteriorating*, 1 March 2000; Human Rights Watch, *Emptying the Hills, Regroupment in Burundi*, Human Rights Watch, New York, July 2000 (www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burundi2/).
5. Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 'Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Conflict and Displacement in Burundi', October 2000 (www.womenscommission.org/pdf/bi.pdf)
6. Human Rights Watch, *Emptying the Hills, Regroupment in Burundi*, Human Rights Watch, New York, July 2000, pp18-20.
7. See, for example, *Forced Relocation in Burundi, Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons*, UNCHR, Doc. E/CN.4/2001/5/Add.1 (5 March 2000)