

# “I know the consequences of war”:

## Understanding the dynamics of displacement in Burundi



## About the International Refugee Rights Initiative

The International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI) enhances the rights of those excluded from state protection as a result of forced displacement, conflict, discriminatory violence and statelessness. IRRI believes that strengthening the rights, capacities and democratic participation of these communities—refugees, the forcibly displaced, the conflict-affected, the stateless and those suffering violent discrimination on the basis of their political status—is essential to building just, peaceful and flourishing states and communities. IRRI redresses imbalances in power that fuel violent exclusion of vulnerable populations from protection through:

- tackling the root causes of exile, statelessness, discriminatory violence, and conflict through which state protection is lost;
- enhancing the agency and protection of those who are forcibly displaced or threatened with displacement; and
- promoting the re-building of just and inclusive communities in which genuine citizenship is forged and displacement and exile comes to an end.

IRRI grounds its advocacy in regional and international human rights instruments and strives to make these guarantees effective at the local level.

[www.refugee-rights.org](http://www.refugee-rights.org)

## Background to the Paper

This report is based on field research conducted by anonymous researchers in Burundi. Lucy Hovil and Olivia Bueno were the primary drafters of the report, with input and support from Andie Lambe. The team would like to express enormous gratitude to all those who gave their time and participated in the study.

*Front cover photo: A Road in Burundi, February 2016 © IRRI.*

# Contents

Executive Summary.....	4
Recommendations.....	6
Background.....	11
A crisis with a long history .....	11
The current crisis.....	12
Methodology.....	16
To Stay or to Go.....	17
Atrocities by those in power .....	17
Targeting of protesters and activists.....	18
<i>Imbonerakure</i> .....	19
The police and the army.....	21
Rumours of war and prophecies .....	23
Historical precedent.....	24
Cycles of displacement and poverty.....	25
Staying behind.....	27
When and if to return?.....	29
Returning – but to what?.....	32
Perspectives on the crisis.....	34
A deeply political crisis.....	34
Disillusionment with <i>all</i> politicians.....	35
Ethnic tension.....	37
A crisis brewing for years.....	38
Land: the heart of the matter.....	39
The way forward?.....	42
The pull of rebellion.....	42
Dialogue?.....	43
Conclusion.....	46

# Executive Summary

Since April 2015, Burundi has been in the midst of a political crisis sparked by the announcement that President Pierre Nkurunziza would stand for a third term. While the constitution limits presidents to two terms, President Nkurunziza argued that his first term, during the transitional period, did not count towards this limit, and Burundi's Constitutional Court agreed. In response, serious protests rocked the capital, Bujumbura. The government attempted to suppress the protests and excessive force by the police led to a number of deaths among protesters. At the same time, opposition forces were accused of coercing participation in these protests.

The situation further escalated after an unsuccessful *coup d'etat* on 14 May 2015. Although the coup was quickly quelled, the prospect of violent resistance to the government remains. By the end of 2015, a number of rebel movements had formed and launched attacks on military targets as well as grenade attacks in civilian areas.

Although the situation has not descended into all-out civil war as many had feared, repression and human rights violations remain a serious concern. In the period from April 2015 to August 2016, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented 564 cases of extrajudicial executions.<sup>1</sup> Although OHCHR has reported that the number of cases of extrajudicial executions has declined since the start of 2016, it noted that there had been a significant increase in the number of reported disappearances and cases of torture.<sup>2</sup>

Since April 2015, more than 315,000 Burundians have fled the country and a further 100,000 are internally displaced.<sup>3</sup> The scale of the exodus took some by surprise given the lack of open armed conflict in Burundi (notwithstanding the seriousness of the human rights situation). This report explores why some fled and others stayed and provides unique insight into grassroots perspectives on the crisis. It shows that displacement was driven both by the direct tensions between government and opposition, but also by broader social, economic and cultural concerns.

In the case of the former, some felt directly targeted, most commonly by government forces but also in some cases by the opposition. Most in this group were political activists or those who had participated in protests. In general those that sympathised with the ruling party felt less vulnerable than those who supported the opposition. Many talked specifically of their fear of the *imbonerakure*, (literally "those who see from far") that is present throughout the country. It is officially the ruling party's youth wing but is alleged to be a parallel force, settling the government's scores outside the formal structures of state authority.

---

<sup>1</sup> UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the United Nations Independent Investigation on Burundi (UNIIB) established pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution S-24/1," 20 September 2016, UN Doc No. A/HRC/33/37, available at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/UNIIB/Pages/UNIIB.aspx>, accessed 22 October 2016.

<sup>2</sup> UN OHCHR, "Rapport du Haut-Commissaire des Nations Unies aux droits de l'homme sur la situation des droits de l'homme au Burundi," 17 June 2016, UN Doc No A/HRC/32/30, available at <http://www.ohchr.org/FR/Countries/AfricaRegion/Pages/BIIndex.aspx>, accessed 21 October 2016.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, "Burundi Situation: Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal," available at <http://data.unhcr.org/burundi/regional.php>, accessed 4 November 2016.

A number of those who fled, however, had not been directly affected by the crisis when they decided to leave, inasmuch as their lives were not in direct danger. Instead, they fled out fear that the current crisis would escalate, a fear that was, in part, stoked by rumours and prophecies of impending war and destruction combined with previous experiences of conflict and displacement. Those who had lived through the wars of the early 1970s and/or the 1990s knew only too well the terrible damage that conflict can inflict and were not prepared to wait and see how this crisis would develop. The dire economic conditions that many experienced in Burundi also made some more vulnerable and influenced their decision to flee. Those that chose to stay did so either because they viewed the rumours as less credible, or because they knew how tough life would be in exile and on that basis were prepared to see if the situation escalated before making that decision.

The views of those interviewed also offers insight into different perceptions of the political crisis. First, most viewed the crisis as primarily political rather than ethnic in nature, although given the close links between politics and ethnicity in Burundi there is an ethnic dimension at play. Some were fearful that this could be manipulated to ethnicise the conflict further over time. Second, most people were focused on their own economic struggle for survival, a struggle that has only been made worse by the ongoing political crisis. The crisis has already thoroughly undermined the country's fragile economy: people who were poor before the crisis are now barely able to survive, and economic scarcity in the country is hard to exaggerate. Those who were displaced from their homes (whether internally or externally) were particularly vulnerable. Some sold their assets at reduced prices to pay for transport; and some, who have since returned at their own cost, have found that their assets have been lost or taken. Some who are still in Nyaragusu camp in Tanzania said that they want to return but cannot afford either the journey or the cost of reactivating their livelihoods; while others said that they will not return until there is a clear political solution to the crisis. Some said they would never return.

Conspicuous throughout the interviews is that most see their fragile economic situation to be primarily the result of mismanagement by the government, through corruption and the failure to ensure proper reconstruction and recovery since the war. This perception was particularly acute in the case of those who had returned after having been refugees. While some logistical assistance was provided to returnees following the signing of the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi (Arusha Agreement) that officially ended the civil war in 2000, this assistance was insufficient to ensure genuine reintegration, as IRRI has previously documented.<sup>4</sup> It is no coincidence, therefore, that a considerable number of those who have fled since April 2015 had previously been displaced. Some were born and grew up in Tanzania, but had returned to Burundi in the late 2000s hopeful that they could make a new life for themselves. Instead, many have struggled to reclaim their land and reintegrate into the communities from which they, or their families, had once fled and expressed frustration, that the government had lied to them about the support they would receive. While this was not necessarily the primary reason that they fled this time, it certainly increased

---

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, IRRI, Rema Ministries and the Social Science Research Council, "Two People Cannot Wear the Same Pair of Shoes": Citizenship, Land and the Return of Refugees to Burundi," Citizenship and Forced Migration in the Great Lakes Region Working Paper No. 2, November 2009, available at <http://www.refugee-rights.org/Publications/Papers/2009/TwoPeopleCantWeartheSamePairOfShoes.111009.pdf> accessed 30 November 2016

their vulnerability. And while our findings documented a number of individuals who had fled in mid-2015 who had since returned, hundreds of thousands remain in exile waiting to see what will happen next.

At the heart of much of this discussion was the issue of access to land. As previous IRRI research has demonstrated, land is not only critical for ensuring livelihoods, it is also symbolic of reintegration and represents a (re-)connection with both local communities and the broader polity.<sup>5</sup> However, this vital resource is in short supply, with population growth making Burundi one of the most densely populated countries on the continent. Although efforts have been made to address this issue, the lack of sufficient support for alternative forms of livelihood and unfair systems for managing land access and ownership have both created and exacerbated tensions.

While people understood their current poverty within the broader context of the political crisis, most of those interviewed – whether those who had fled or those who had chosen to remain – placed themselves at a distance from what they saw as a struggle among political groups unconcerned with their plight. They expressed disillusionment with all those who claimed to represent them, whether government or members of opposition parties, and perceived the pursuit of power on both sides to be motivated by a desire to gain access to resources. Worse still, many of those who have spoken out against injustices have become victimised by the state that was supposed to protect them, or, (albeit to a lesser extent), by opposition actors who likewise claim their objective is to protect the people. In this context of total disillusionment with all those in or seeking power, the lack of political space for expressing concerns, along with ongoing human rights abuses, has created a huge deficit in civic trust. The issue of the third term, therefore, was seen as secondary to, and a symptom of, the deeper entrenched crisis of failures in governance.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the findings show that there are no easy solutions to the current situation. While some see violence as the only option to change the status quo, the majority are putting their hopes in a dialogue process – albeit one that they are far from optimistic about. Ultimately, people spoke of their desire to see a political structure that can address the deficit in legitimacy of the existing political structures in the country, which has plagued the country since the signing of the Arusha Agreement. The majority of Burundians who are not in a position of political power need to feel that the government is responsive to their situation and that genuine progress is being made to improve their lives.

## Recommendations

There is an urgent need for support to Burundi to allow for a negotiated political solution and for a comprehensive recovery programme that will allow ordinary Burundians who have been adversely affected by the crisis – whether displaced or not – to rebuild their lives. While primary responsibility for this lies with the government of Burundi, it is a process that needs to be adequately supported by regional actors and the broader international community.

### **To all actors:**

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

- **Establish a strong and credible dialogue process.** Most of those interviewed for this research had little faith in the dialogue processes (both international and domestic) as currently configured, but at the same time saw dialogue as the most viable way to finding a political solution to the crisis. An agreement was, in turn, seen as an essential first step to addressing the broader issue of political disenfranchisement. Therefore, the current dialogue process must be reformed and/or supplemented significantly to be seen as credible by the people of Burundi and not just the political elite. In order to be successful, dialogue must:
  - *Be, and be seen to be, inclusive.* As many interviewees recognised, any negotiation process must be inclusive if it is to have any chance of being successful. Many of those interviewed viewed the external negotiations as more viable than the internal dialogue process because they were more inclusive.
  - *Have a clear substantive programme.* The substance of the negotiations should be well thought out and should include discussion of the issues that have allowed the crisis to evolve, including corruption, weak institutions, failures in development and the democratic deficit of current structures.

#### To the government of Burundi:

Burundi's political system is in crisis. There is a very real danger that if the government of Burundi does not listen to and engage with all forces willing to engage with it, this will be used as justification for violence. At the same time, efforts at dialogue will be seen as more credible in an environment in which the government shows willingness to ensure security. Therefore, the government of Burundi should take urgent steps to:

- **Ensure security.** It was clear that many individuals feel fearful, both of violence, arbitrary arrest or disappearance at the hands of state security forces or of violence at the hands of the opposition. While the government appears to be pursuing accountability for the violence committed by rebels (albeit in a heavy handed way), there has been no apparent effort to address the conduct of its own security forces.
- **Refrain from violence and commit to dialogue.** Although a government can legitimately use violence in certain circumstances, it should do so judiciously and only after all non-violent means have failed. It is clear that the majority of Burundians place most faith in dialogue as a means of going forward, and the government should embrace this.
- **Make the functioning of the *imbonerakure* more transparent.** It is clear that there is significant fear of the *imbonerakure*, who are seen to be a shadowy organisation, with an unclear membership and mandate. The government can address these fears by requiring the *imbonerakure* to operate more transparently by making their membership and mandate known. The government should also commit not to use the *imbonerakure* for enforcement.
- **Ensure freedom of expression.** Freedom of expression is a fundamental tenet in a democracy. One of the hallmarks of this current crisis has been the shutting down and stifling of the media and civil society organisations in Burundi. Although it is positive that some media outlets have been allowed to reopen, the recent closure of five civil society organisations suggests that the government must do more to be able to

demonstrate or even claim a real commitment to freedom of expression. All media outlets and civil society organisations, especially those that are critical of the government, must be allowed to operate freely. Arrest warrants and extradition requests against journalists and civil society activists must be rescinded unless there is strong and reliable evidence that laws, consistent with international human rights law, have been broken, in which case the individuals must be brought to trial at a speed and in a manner that is rights respecting and meets international standards.

- **Ensure transparency in all spheres of public life.** Transparency is key to ensuring good governance and the first step towards fighting corruption, which undermines public trust, threatens the rule of law and inhibits development. The findings demonstrate that the disillusionment felt by many Burundians was motivated by the perception that government and opposition officials are simply pursuing power for personal gain. In order to assuage these fears, and create an environment where civic trust is rebuilt, the government needs to take urgent and public action to address the lack of transparency and extent of corruption that plagues the government structures.
- **Ensure those who have committed serious abuses of human rights are held accountable.** Lack of accountability for previous rounds of violence has contributed to a situation in which so many Burundians feel compelled to flee the mere potential for violence. Ensuring accountability will be critical to break these cycles of violence and displacement and foster a culture of trust. A preliminary step in this regard will be facilitating the gathering and preservation of evidence by neutral investigators.
- **Create conditions to facilitate the return and reintegration of displaced persons.** While a negotiated political settlement is critical to ensuring safe and durable return, other measures also need to be in place. In particular:
  - *Protect the property of the displaced.* While the government's orders that the property of the displaced must be protected are positive, the findings show that this is not always happening in practice. Therefore, more needs to be done to ensure the protections of people's property and mechanisms must be put in place now to allow for those who lose property to be assisted to recover it and/or receive compensation.
  - *Provide assistance to returnees.* This assistance must address both immediate humanitarian needs and the broader demands of reintegration into social structures.

#### To opposition groups:

- **Refrain from violence and commit to dialogue.** Despite the many injustices that the opposition rightfully opposes, it is clear that the majority of Burundians place most faith in dialogue as a means of going forward, therefore the opposition groups, as representatives of some of the Burundian people, must recognise the value of and engage in dialogue to create a lasting peace.
- **Ensure transparency in all their operations.** As part of Burundi's political structures, opposition parties have a responsibility to the people of Burundi to ensure that they undertake all their activities transparently. Many Burundians expressed concerns about corruption in the opposition as well as in the government, the



opposition should proactively and publicly address these perceptions by increasing transparency in their own operations and engagements with the government.

- **Respect the human rights of Burundians.** The opposition has been accused of coercing participation in protests and in its electoral boycott, particularly within in its strongholds. It should immediate cease such actions.
- **Respect freedom of expression.** Like the government, the opposition must respect the right of Burundians to express their views and opinions freely and without fear of repercussion.
- **Ensure they have and retain the mandate of their supporters.** To ensure they are credible representatives within the dialogue process, they must hold appropriate consultation with their supporters and ensure that their political platforms address the needs of ordinary Burundians – not just rhetorically but in practice.
- **Commit to ensuring accountability for those under their control who have committed serious human rights abuses.** Although the government of Burundi was seen as responsible for a greater number of violations, the opposition should commit to ensuring accountability for those within its ranks who violate human rights. Opposition can also play a role in ensuring accountability by integrating this into their political platform and facilitating the gathering and preservation of evidence by neutral investigators.

#### To the international community:

- **Ensure that violations of human rights are denounced vigorously, consistently and publicly** regardless of who is responsible. There is an impression among some Burundians that the international community has been reluctant to condemn human rights violations committed by the opposition. In order to be seen as credible, the international community must be seen to be holding all parties to the same standards.
- **Support independent and professional media and civil society.** The lack of credible information about the developing situation in the country clearly played a role in the spread of rumours, which helped to intensify displacement. Therefore, there is a need for ongoing support for an independent and professional media and civil society, through financial support, training and through advocacy for the protection of freedom of expression. In addition, in a context in which civil society has been accused of reporting false information to the detriment of the government, it is critical that civil society and media are able to meet high standards of professionalism in gathering and disseminating information.
- **Local and international civil society must take action to promote the circulation of high quality, accurate information.** In the context of rumour and disinformation, civil society has an important role to play in countering disinformation by providing independent and accurate information. However, they will only be able to do this if they are supported to act independently and professionally.
- **Ensure planning is undertaken to support recovery, repatriation and reintegration.** Although the international community is understandably wary of supporting or encouraging return under the current circumstances, international organisations and host governments should not obstruct the return of those who voluntarily choose to do so. In addition, more could be done to plan for comprehensive assistance to address both the immediate humanitarian needs of returnees, and their need to recover property and achieve full reintegration.

- **Support efforts to ensure accountability for those who have committed serious violations of human rights.** Lack of accountability for previous rounds of violence has contributed to the current crisis. International support for accountability can help to ensure that cycles of violence and displacement are broken.
- **Ensure an urgent and appropriate humanitarian response.** Burundi is already one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 184 out of 188 countries in UNDP's Human Development Index. The ongoing crisis is worsening the situation. In September 2016, it was estimated that 19% of the Burundian population, or 1.46 million people, are severely food insecure (IPC phase 3 or 4).<sup>6</sup> In this context, urgent humanitarian assistance is needed. Urgent assistance must also be provided to refugees who, as the research shows, are facing inadequate assistance and underfunded responses in host countries.
- **Protect the rights of refugees in neighbouring countries.** It is vital that the countries that are receiving refugees from the Burundi crisis respect their rights under international refugee law. In particular, they must refrain from unduly pressuring refugees to return or mounting large scale return operations before the necessary conditions for allowing genuine reintegration are in place.
- **Ensure effective sanctions.** Both the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) have imposed targeted individual sanctions against those responsible for the crisis in Burundi. While this approach is laudable in that it has both the potential to affect the decision making of those individual actors and protect ordinary Burundians from the impact of broader sanctions, more could be done. The EU and US could increase the effectiveness of their sanctions by sharing information and, as appropriate, designating the same individuals. In addition, sanctions will be more effective if they implemented more consistently globally, so similar sanctions imposed by the UN and/or regional actors would be useful in increasing their effectiveness. However, care must be taken to ensure that sanctions do not further damage the already precarious economic situation of ordinary Burundians.
- **Ensure that all personnel contributed by Burundi to international peacekeeping missions are thoroughly vetted.** In the context of the widespread reports of human rights violations in Burundi, it will be critical that personnel contributed by Burundi to international peacekeeping operations are vetted to avoid a situation in which these lucrative positions become a "reward" for violating rights or violations are exported. Troop contributing countries often take primary responsibility for vetting, but given the government of Burundi's alleged complicity in these violations, independent vetting will be necessary.

---

<sup>6</sup> Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, "Burundi: Current Acute Food Insecurity Situation July-September 2016," available at <http://reliefweb.int/report/burundi/burundi-current-acute-food-insecurity-situation-july-september-2016>, accessed 22 October 2016.

# Background

## A crisis with a long history

While much focus has been on President Nkurunziza and his announcement to run for a third term, the current crisis in Burundi is rooted in a long and complex history of conflict and displacement. Since independence in 1962, Burundi has gone through a series of civil conflicts, drawing on many of the fault-lines that were created by the colonial regime. During the colonial period, ethnic identifications were formalised and hardened and used to oppress the majority Hutu population, the legacy of which has continued to send shock-waves through the country's postcolonial history. While a detailed history goes beyond the scope of this paper, a defining moment was a failed Hutu uprising in 1972 against the Tutsi-dominated government which had taken power at independence. It sparked a systematic campaign that resulted in an estimated 150,000 Hutu deaths.<sup>7</sup> Many of those who were killed or fled were from Nyanza-Lac and Rumonge areas, strongholds of government opposition in the south of the country. Approximately 150,000 Hutu fled, primarily to Tanzania, where they remained in exile for decades.

The 1972 killings and the episodes of intense violence that followed (1988, 1991-3, in addition to repercussions from the 1994 genocide in Rwanda), followed a common pattern: in each case, in response to increasing discrimination and injustice, Hutus attacked local Tutsi; the army was sent in to restore order; and Hutu were indiscriminately killed – but in far greater number. Each time, the Tutsi authorities reasserted control on the basis of fear and repression, with the military playing a key role in maintaining government control.<sup>8</sup> On the Tutsi side, the Hutu attacks were perceived as attempts at genocide, from which they were only spared through the intervention of the army.<sup>9</sup> Throughout, the political mobilisation of ethnicity played a crucial role.

Another significant wave of displacement followed in the 1990s as a result of a civil war sparked by the assassination of Burundi's first democratically elected and first Hutu President, Melchior Ndadaye, in 1993. The war officially ended with the signing of the Arusha Agreement, a painstaking peace process that led to the approval of a power-sharing constitution – with Hutu assured 60% representation and Tutsi 40% in the judiciary and with no single ethnic group allowed to constitute more than 50% of the police.<sup>10</sup> The Arusha Agreement also provided for the creation of a new integrated *Forces de Défense Nationale* (FDN), stating that no ethnic group could constitute more than 50% of the armed forces. This integrated army is likely one of the reasons that the current situation has not, to date, spilled over into civil war. A new parliament was elected in 2005 in which the *Conseil National pour la Défense de la Démocratie* –

---

<sup>7</sup> P. Uvin, 1999. "Ethnicity and Power in Burundi and Rwanda: Different Paths to Mass Violence." *Comparative Politics*, 31(3): 253-271. This number was to grow to over 200,000 over the course of the following months. As Uvin comments, "These events constitute the defining moments in independent Burundi's history. They crystallised Hutu and Tutsi identities and created a climate of permanent mutual fear" (p. 258).

<sup>8</sup> J. Chrétien, "Burundi: The Obsession with Genocide," *Current History*, Vol. 95, May 1996, p. 259.

<sup>9</sup> Uvin, 2009, p.14.

<sup>10</sup> "Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi," University of Notre Dame, Peace Accords Matrix, available at <https://peaceaccords.nd.edu/accord/arusha-peace-and-reconciliation-agreement-burundi>, accessed 25 October 2016.

*Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie* (CNDD-FDD) held (and still holds) the majority of seats and Pierre Nkurunziza, (a Hutu), was elected President. The last remaining rebel group, the *Forces National de Libération* (FNL), signed a ceasefire in May 2008 and its leader, Agathon Rwasa (who was one of the few opposition politicians who participated in the 2015 elections), returned to Burundi and registered the FNL as a political party. Some FNL rebels were integrated into the national army and others were demobilised, ushering in new hope for sustainable peace.

The following years saw some progress towards greater stability, not least through the implementation of aspects of the Arusha Agreement. Yet while the progress around power-sharing is likely to have played a role in preventing the ethnicisation of the current crisis, it is clear that a democratic deficit remains. The extent to which this was a result of the construction of the agreement itself or a lack of commitment on the part of certain powerful political leaders has been much debated.

Regardless, with the end of open conflict signifying political changes for the better, from 2002-2010 approximately half a million refugees returned home. While a large number repatriated as soon as there was a modicum of stability in Burundi, many of those that hesitated were subjected to considerable push factors in countries of exile.<sup>11</sup> This repatriation led to significant disputes over land, with refugees (from both the 1970s and the 1990s) coming into conflict with current occupants as they tried to reclaim their land and homes. This tension exacerbated tensions created by the democratic deficit and left Burundi vulnerable to a new round of political crisis. A further approximately 162,000 refugees who accepted an offer of naturalisation from the government of Tanzania did not return.

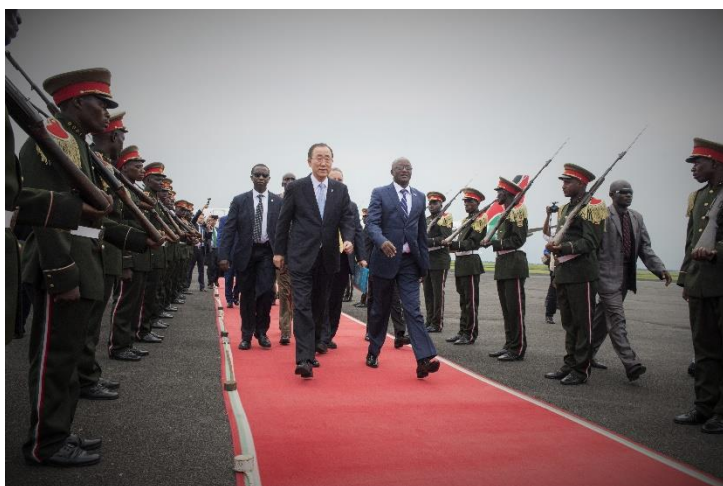
## The current crisis

The crisis that erupted in April 2015 following President Nkurunziza's announcement that he would run for a third term, therefore, took few Burundians by surprise. Although Burundi's constitution<sup>12</sup> contains a two term limit, President Nkurunziza argued, and the Constitutional Court agreed (albeit reportedly under pressure) that his first term did not count because he was appointed by parliament rather than in a general election. Serious protests then rocked the capital, Bujumbura. The government attempted to suppress the protests violently, with excessive force on the part of police leading to a number of deaths among protesters.

---

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the International Refugee Rights Initiative, "From refugee to returnee to asylum seeker: Burundian refugees struggle to find protection in the Great Lakes region," November 2013, available at <http://www.refugee-rights.org/Assets/PDFs/2013/From%20refugee%20to%20returnee%20FINAL.pdf>, accessed 18 November 2016; International Refugee Rights Initiative and Rema Ministries, "An urgent briefing on the situation of Burundian refugees in Mtabila camp in Tanzania," November 2012, available at <http://www.refugee-rights.org/Assets/PDFs/2012/Mtabila%20FINAL.pdf>, accessed 18 November 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Burundi's Constitution of 2005, art. 96, available at [http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/Constiution\\_de\\_Burundi\\_\(French\).pdf](http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/Constiution_de_Burundi_(French).pdf), accessed 22 October 2016.



*UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon visits Burundi, February 2016*

© UN photo

The situation escalated on 14 May following an attempted *coup d'état*, which created additional impetus for the government's crackdown against protesters and led to a series of arrests and disappearances of those allegedly responsible. Protests continued nonetheless, subject to continuing forceful repression. While many of the protesters were peaceful, some were not and clashes between protesters and police were reported. In addition, there were a number of allegations of opposition forces pressuring individuals to participate. The coup also led to the closure of a number of media outlets. Although

two out of the five radio stations closed have since been allowed to reopen, the situation for media remains incredibly tense.<sup>13</sup>

The international community expressed concern about the increasingly hostile and unstable environment and called for a delay in elections. Although the government offered minimal concessions delaying the elections by a few days (as opposed to weeks or, preferably, months as requested by the opposition), arguing that they needed to proceed quickly to avoid a constitutional vacuum. Communal and parliamentary elections were held on 29 June, and the presidential elections on 21 July, without allowing enough time for serious dialogue to take place. International observers criticised the process: the EU and African Union decided not to deploy a planned election observation missions; and the EU withheld funding for the elections.<sup>14</sup>

Most of the opposition, protesting government unwillingness to offer a significant postponement and dialogue, boycotted the elections, and allegedly intimidated some of those in opposition strongholds who wanted to vote. From the perspective of the government, the results not only confirmed their position, but emboldened them, as they won an overwhelming majority of seats in parliament.<sup>15</sup> Outside of government, however, there was strong criticism. The UN Election Observation Mission (MENUB), deployed in all 18 provinces of Burundi, concluded that the

<sup>13</sup> See, Reporters Without Borders, "Two of Five Closed Radio Stations Allowed to Reopen," 23 February 2016, available at <http://en.rsf.org/burundi-two-of-five-closed-radio-stations-23-02-2016,48858.html>, accessed 22 October 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Reuters, "Burundi votes in boycott-hit poll; blasts, gunfire heard," 29 June 2015, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-burundi-election-idUSKCN0P90H820150629>, accessed 22 October 2016; European Union External Action "Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini on the suspension of the EOM to Burundi," available at [http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/150528\\_02\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/150528_02_en.htm), accessed 18 November 2016.

<sup>15</sup> VOA News, "Burundi ruling party takes parliamentary elections," 7 July 2015, available at: <http://www.voanews.com/content/burundi-ruling-party-takes-parliamentary-elections/2852220.html>, accessed 22 October 2016.

parliamentary elections had taken place “in a tense political crisis and a climate of widespread fear and intimidation in parts of the country.”<sup>16</sup>

The situation escalated further on 11 December 2015, when armed opposition launched a coordinated attack on three government military installations, killing an estimated 87 people.<sup>17</sup> On 23 December, a rebel movement called the *Forces Républicaines du Burundi* (or FOREBU) was created with the aim of forcibly removing Nkurunziza “to restore the Arusha accord and democracy.”<sup>18</sup> Another group, RED TABARA was formed in January 2016, claiming to be “protecting Burundians from the deadly barbarism of the tyrannical power in place in Bujumbura.”<sup>19</sup> These rebel groups are seen as likely to be responsible for grenade and armed attacks in civilian areas.<sup>20</sup>

The December attacks were quickly contained by the government, allegedly using high levels of brutality. Although OHCHR was unable to verify allegations of “mass arrests” in response to the incident, they did monitor 262 case of arbitrary arrest and detention in December 2015 alone.<sup>21</sup> In January, Amnesty International reported the existence of mass graves in Burundi.<sup>22</sup> The UN Independent Investigation on Burundi (UNIIB) reported that satellite imagery was consistent with the existence of mass graves and that it had received corroborating testimony about the existence of these sites.<sup>23</sup> While the government admits that it buried 58 suspected rebels who remained unidentified without notifying their families, it denies the existence of mass graves.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The Guardian, “UN declares Burundi elections not free or credible amid tense standoff,” 3 July 2015, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/03/un-declares-burundi-elections-not-free-or-credible-amid-tense-standoff> accessed 30 November 2016

<sup>17</sup> BBC News, “Burundi security forces accused of violent repression,” 22 December 2015, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-35157517>, accessed 25 October 2016.

<sup>18</sup> AFP, “Burundi rebels organize ‘Forebu’ force to oust president,” Daily Mail, 23 December 2015, available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3371912/Burundi-rebels-announce-force-oust-president.html>, accessed 22 October 2016.

<sup>19</sup> RED TABARA, “Communiqué de presse relative à l’échec du sommet de l’Union Africaine,” 31 January 2016, available at <http://mporeburundi.org/red-tabara-communique-de-presse-relatif-a-lechec-du-sommet-de-lunion-africaine/>, accessed 22 October 2016.

<sup>20</sup> UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Rapport du Haut Commissaire des Nations Unies aux droits de l’homme sur la situation des droits de l’homme au Burundi,” 17 June 2016, UN Doc No A/HRC/32/30, available at <http://www.ohchr.org/FR/Countries/AfricaRegion/Pages/BIIndex.aspx>, accessed 21 October 2016.

<sup>21</sup> “Burundi: Inter-Agency Monitoring Report,” 29 January 2016, available at <http://reliefweb.int/report/burundi/burundi-inter-agency-monitoring-report-29-january-2016>, accessed 25 October 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Amnesty International, “Burundi: Suspected Mass Graves of Victims of 11 December Violence,” 28 January 2016, available at <http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/burundi-suspected-mass-graves-of-victims-of-11-december-violence>, accessed 25 October 2016.

<sup>23</sup> UN Human Rights Council, “Report of the United Nations Independent Investigation on Burundi (UNIIB) established pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution S-24/1,” 20 September 2016, UN Doc No. A/HRC/33/37, available at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/UNIIB/Pages/UNIIB.aspx>, accessed 22 October 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Eloge Willy Kaneza, “Burundi: 58 people buried without notifying families,” 10 March 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/03/10/burundi-govt-58-people-buried-without-notifying-families.html>, accessed 25 October 2016.

Although the situation has not, to date, descended into all-out civil war as many feared, levels of political repression – including arbitrary arrest, detention, torture and sexual violence – have continued since April 2015. Figures for the number of those killed and/or arrested are hard to ascertain. As of August 2016, OHCHR had documented 564 extrajudicial executions.<sup>25</sup> They also reported that the number of extrajudicial executions had decreased since the start of 2016, but that enforced disappearances and torture had increased with 345 new cases of torture and ill-treatment by government security forces in Burundi being documented between January and April 2016.<sup>26</sup> Much of the abuse is attributed to the government or the *imbonerakure*.<sup>27</sup> For instance, in July a Human Rights Watch report accused the *imbonerakure* and Burundi police of raping women, with many attacks targeting relatives of perceived government opponents.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, there have been a number of high-level political figures attacked and assassinated. Two senior army officers were killed in Bujumbura in late April 2016.<sup>29</sup> Human Rights Minister, Martin Nivyabandi, and his wife survived a grenade attack in Bujumbura on April 24;<sup>30</sup> in late May, Zedi Feruzi leaders of the Union for Peace and Development (UPD) was killed with his bodyguard<sup>31</sup> and a retired army colonel was shot dead;<sup>32</sup> and on 13 July former government minister and member of the ruling CNDD-FDD, Hafsa Mossi, was shot dead in Bujumbura.<sup>33</sup> In August 2015 former Army Chief of Staff Colonel Jean Bikomagu and prominent member of the opposition was killed.<sup>34</sup> In September 2015, Army Chief of Staff General Prime Niyongabo survived an assassination attempt.

<sup>25</sup> UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the United Nations Independent Investigation on Burundi (UNIIB) established pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution S-24/1," 20 September 2016, UN Doc No. A/HRC/33/37, available at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/UNIIB/Pages/UNIIB.aspx>, accessed 22 October 2016.

<sup>26</sup> UN Human Rights, "Torture and illegal detention on the rise in Burundi - Zeid," 18 April 2016, available at: [www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=19835&LangID=E](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=19835&LangID=E), accessed 27 July 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Burundi: Abductions, Killings, Spread Fear," 25 February 2016, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/25/burundi-abductions-killings-spread-fear>, accessed 8 August 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Burundi: Gang Rapes by Ruling Party Youth," 27 July 2016, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/27/burundi-gang-rapes-ruling-party-youth>, accessed 27 July 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Reuters, "Army officer, three more killed in Burundi violence, officials say," 21 April 2016, available at: [www.reuters.com/article/us-burundi-security-idUSKCN0XI13Q](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-burundi-security-idUSKCN0XI13Q), accessed 28 July 2016, Reuters, Burundi president condemns killing of general amid rising violence, 26 April 2016, available at: [www.reuters.com/article/us-burundi-politics-idUSKCN0XN0FA](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-burundi-politics-idUSKCN0XN0FA), accessed 28 July 2016.

<sup>30</sup> AFP, "Burundi minister targeted in grenade attack," 24 April 2016, available at: [www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3556859/Burundi-minister-targeted-grenade-attack.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3556859/Burundi-minister-targeted-grenade-attack.html), accessed 28 July 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Al Jazeera, "Burundi opposition figure Zedi Feruzi shot dead," 24 May 2015, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/burundi-opposition-leader-zedi-feruzi-shot-dead-150523193449576.html>, accessed 18 November 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Reuters, "Retired Burundian officer killed amid tension over presidency," 25 May 2016, available at: [www.af.reuters.com/article/burundiNews/idAFL5N18M35Q](http://www.af.reuters.com/article/burundiNews/idAFL5N18M35Q), accessed 28 July 2016.

<sup>33</sup> AFP, "Former Burundi minister Hafsa Mossi shot dead," 13 July 2016, available at: [www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3688204/Former-Burundi-minister-Hafsa-Mossi-shot-dead.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3688204/Former-Burundi-minister-Hafsa-Mossi-shot-dead.html), accessed 27 July 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Reuters, "Burundi's former army chief shot dead in second political assassination this month," 15 August 2015, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/burundi/11805287/Burundis-former-army-chief-shot-dead-in-second-political-assassination-this-month.html>, accessed 18 November 2016.

Meanwhile, the government set up a National Commission for Inter-Burundian Dialogue (CNDI) in September 2015.<sup>35</sup> In August 2016, the President of the CNDI released a report on the consultations up to that point claiming the majority of Burundians want to abolish term limits to review of the Arusha Agreement. Reform of electoral laws and action to fight unemployment were also recommended.

The government of Burundi has rejected any international criticism of the current situation, including UN reports, on the basis that they are “purposefully and politically exaggerated.”<sup>36</sup> It has also rejected the ICC, saying that it is part of a broader agenda of regime change by Western powers, and withdrew from the court in October 2016.<sup>37</sup> With the situation on the ground still tense and the government growing increasingly recalcitrant, solutions seem elusive.

## Methodology

This paper is based on 117 individual interviews conducted in Burundi and Tanzania in May and June 2016. In Burundi, interviews took place in several locations in the southern provinces of Rumonge, Rutana, and Makamba, as well as in the capital Bujumbura. In Tanzania, interviews were conducted with refugees in and around Nyarugusu refugee camp.

In Bujumbura, 25 interviews, including six women, were conducted in areas of the city in which demonstrations were held. Most interviewees either identified with or were members of either the ruling party or the opposition, but a few were not affiliated to any of the political parties.

The three provinces in southern Burundi where research was undertaken have all witnessed significant displacement since the beginning of the current crisis and in the past. Rumonge Province, where 20 interviews were conducted, has produced many refugees, who left for Tanzania and the DRC, and has also been known as a destination for opposition fighters and demonstrators who went



*Burundi, Research locations marked with black arrows, map care of Nations Online.*

<sup>35</sup> Burundi – CNDI “Le président de la CNDI présente le rapport trimestriel de la commission,” 24 August 2016, available at <http://www.burundi.gov.bi/spip.php?article1364>, accessed 28 September 2016.

<sup>36</sup> UN News Centre, “Burundi rejects UN report on country’s human rights situation as ‘purposefully and politically exaggerated’,” 24 September 2016, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=55111#.WA2EWTLmZVo>, accessed 22 October 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Watch, “ICC Withdrawal Major Loss to Victims,” 27 October 2016, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/27/burundi-icc-withdrawal-major-loss-victims>, accessed 16 November 2016.



into hiding. In Rutana Province, which shares a border with Tanzania, and is relatively close to Nyarugusu refugee camp, 29 interviews were carried out in the communes of Rutana, Giharo and Bukemba. Interviewees, of which 13 were women, identified with both opposition groups and the ruling party. Makamba, Burundi's southernmost province, also borders Tanzania, and 25 interviews, including 12 women, were held in Nyanza-Lac and Mabanda communes.

In Tanzania, in and around Nyarugusu refugee camp (Kigoma Region), 18 individuals were interviewed, of which two were women. Nyarugusu is the largest camp hosting refugees from Burundi in Tanzania. It is currently also hosting refugees from other countries, as well as a small population of pre-April 2015 refugees from Burundi.

## To Stay or to Go

One of the core questions the research focused on was what were the factors that pushed so many to flee – and others to remain. The scale and speed of displacement took many external commentators by surprise. While thousands fled from and within Bujumbura, tens of thousands fled from areas outside of the capital which, on the surface, had remained relatively calm. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that in the 18 months since April 2015, over 315,000 people have fled Burundi,<sup>38</sup> although these figures reflect only officially registered refugees and not those who have opted to remain outside of camp structures or who were displaced within Burundi.

**“[the ruling party] made people betray others and created suspicions among friends to the point that today everybody is afraid of everybody.”**

When asked about their decision to flee or stay, the interviewees expressed a combination of factors. These included fear created by the protests and unrest in Bujumbura; the deliberate targeting of individuals; rumours and prophecies that the violence would worsen, and previous experiences of violence and displacement. In some cases, past experience of displacement pushed individuals to flee sooner, trying to escape the worst of the crisis. In other cases, the memory of the hardships of life in exile pushed them to attempt to remain despite the risk.

## Atrocities by those in power

One of the key reasons that interviewees gave for fleeing was the terrible violence that many have suffered directly or indirectly at the hands of those in power. Whether in the form of the *imbonerakure*, the police or the army, authority has disintegrated into an abusive power. While the majority of the stories of abuse that we documented concerned government authorities, there were also stories of opposition authorities abusing power in areas that are their strongholds. The stories of atrocities that have been – and that continue to be – committed are not only horrifying in

<sup>38</sup> UNHCR, “Burundi Situation: Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal,” available at <http://data.unhcr.org/burundi/regional.php>, accessed 4 November 2016.

and of themselves, but continue to create an atmosphere of fear and undermine the credibility of the government. People, particularly in Bujumbura, live in fear of being targeted by security forces.

Many had stories to tell of seeing bodies on the streets, of seeing people arrested and taken away, of sexual violence and of people being beaten and tortured. A woman told of how, during the demonstrations, she witnessed three men being beaten to death in front of her:

One was wearing training clothes for exercise and two had ordinary clothes... They had their hands tied behind their backs and were killed with heavy wood. When I saw how they were being killed I cried out and those killers beat me thoroughly when they saw me crying... I heard people saying these killers were *imbonerakure*. The worst thing was that nobody dared ask why these people were being killed. A vehicle came and took away those corpses. That same day, my husband was also killed and when I saw how he was killed, he was cut into two parts, I feared for my life and decided to flee the next day.<sup>39</sup>

Several interviewees talked about the aftermath of the attacks on the military barracks in Bujumbura on 11 December: "I saw dead bodies during the morning after the attack of the military camps. Several dead people. They were male. They were covered by a cloth in the middle of the road. I saw a dead body in front of the Bon Accueil Hotel [at 6<sup>th</sup> Av. Bwiza] and another at the 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue of Bwiza."<sup>40</sup> And many knew people who had been abducted and never seen again: "I saw a soldier crying for his kidnapped colleague who was reported as missing."<sup>41</sup>

And repression continues, albeit at a lower level and/or, possibly, more hidden. The population is being kept in a state of fear, with pickups "armed to the teeth with heavy weaponry" circulating around many parts of the city.<sup>42</sup>

## Targeting of protesters and activists

While the atrocities described above created a general sense of fear, others reported feeling directly targeted, particularly those living in the areas of Bujumbura where the demonstrations were concentrated. Some reported that they were targeted by security agents, especially if they had participated in the protests. As one young man who is now in hiding outside of Bujumbura said: "there were leaflets that said that whoever went into the streets to protest against the third term should surrender, if not, once arrested, they would be tortured and killed."<sup>43</sup> As another displaced man said: "[a]nyone who had their photo taken during the riots is being hunted."<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Interview with woman, returnee from Tanzania, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with young man living in Bwiza, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with young man living in Bwiza, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with young man, student, living in Musaga (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 30 May 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with young IDP man, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with young IDP man, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

Many of those who fled – particularly from Bujumbura – were young people, a demographic that was strongly associated with the protests. One young man said, “most of the people from my generation left and fled [his quarter, Nyakabiga.]... There are mostly, women, girls, children of primary and secondary schools, old people, who are still there.”<sup>45</sup> As another man said:

people who have not fled are usually over 35 years... Currently, the manhunt is selective and not massive ... And the victims are found in all ethnic groups. They are at high risk because they participated in the demonstrations. These are also people who are members of opposition parties like the MSD [*Mouvement pour la solidarité et le développement*] ... Yet there are also members of the ruling party [CNDD-FDD] who have fled. They were victims of suspicion.<sup>46</sup>

Outside of Bujumbura, people were also targeted. A man who had been demobilised from the FNL told of how he fled from Rumonge because he helped mobilise people to demonstrate against the government in Gatete [15 kilometres from Rumonge town]: “[w]hat prompted me to flee [to a neighbouring province] was a list that was brought by the CNDD-FDD provincial representative, and my name was on it. Many of the rioters and mobilisers who were on this list were arrested and imprisoned.”<sup>47</sup>

Others living in the areas of unrest in Bujumbura stayed, but remained inside their houses in fear. As a man living in Cibitoke said: “[during the protests] the situation was very confusing – you couldn’t know who was shooting because from every direction you could hear the sounds of bullets and grenades. We were living in total fear and insecurity. But now the situation is improved and the security is coming slowly by slowly.”<sup>48</sup>

## *Imbonerakure*

Although the demonstrations spread briefly outside of Bujumbura, they remained focused on the capital. Outside of the capital, however, people expressed other fears about targeted repression – typically citing the *imbonerakure* as the most feared instrument of repression.

Therefore, while the demonstrations centred on the capital that did not mean that rural areas were untouched by the political repression that accompanied them. For many, the face of the threat of repression was the *imbonerakure*. Throughout the interviews, there was reference to the fact that the *imbonerakure* operate across the country, and are greatly feared. The impact of the demonstrations, and the extent to which they pointed to a deeper, national crisis, was evident in the way in which interviewees talked of the fear created by the *imbonerakure*.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with young man, student, Makamba Province, 11 June 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with man living in Musaga, (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 31 May 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with returnee and former IDP, Rumonge Province, 28 June 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with man, living in Cibitoke, Bujumbura, 2 June 2016.

Although on paper they are the ruling party's youth wing, in reality the *imbonerakure* function as a security apparatus that closes the gap between a central political power source and the peripheries, and are seen as the violent arm of the government. As one refugee said: "[i]n my area I was afraid of *imbonerakure*. They were so brutal. During meetings they were saying that they would 'wash and rinse'<sup>49</sup> anybody who is not from their ranks, i.e. anybody who does not belong to the ruling party. Some of them were armed. My question has been what these weapons were meant for."<sup>50</sup> Not surprisingly, they are particularly feared by those who support the opposition, or who do not support the ruling party. One young man told of why he had gone into hiding: "They came to look for me at home so that they could arrest me... People knew that as a whole family we disagreed with the third term of the current President and that we were against the CNDD-FDD."<sup>51</sup> Several interviewees said the *imbonerakure* had tried to prevent them from fleeing. For example, one refugee said, "[w]e were prevented from moving, the police, the army and *imbonerakure* joined together to prevent us from fleeing."<sup>52</sup> One former member of the *imbonerakure* described how he had been targeted for assisting people to flee: "I used to be an *imbonerakure* ... but then I stopped receiving any money, so I started making money by transporting people who were fleeing. But then I realised that CNDD-FDD had registered all those who had helped people to flee, so I had to go myself."<sup>53</sup> Others described having witnessed beatings by the *imbonerakure*.

People were particularly afraid of the fact that there appears to be no accountability for the *imbonerakure*. A woman who had fled to Tanzania in May 2015 but recently returned said, "[t]here are so many *imbonerakure* in this area and

**"[t]here is no relationship except fear, because we actually can't tell who is an informer and who is genuine... So it is as if no-one is safe."**

they make the law and are above the law."<sup>54</sup> Or, as another woman said, "when the *imbonerakure* youth mistreat and hit someone, he has nowhere to complain... We have all witnessed the bad behaviour of the young *imbonerakure*. They are hardy, young and scary. These are not people who can provide advice."<sup>55</sup> One man, who himself had previously been a member of the *imbonerakure*, told of how they were empowered by the government to the extent that their power

"even exceeded that of the police to the point we would go to the prison to release people. We were above the law and we had so much power."<sup>56</sup>

Part of the effectiveness of the *imbonerakure* – and one of the reasons they are so feared – is that they operate from within communities. Their identities are not necessarily known and, therefore, people feel that anyone could be spying on them. A woman whose friend can no longer walk as a result of being beaten by the *imbonerakure* said,

<sup>49</sup> An expression understood in Burundi to mean "to deal with" someone or something, although how the person or thing is supposed to be dealt with is left deliberately vague.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 14 June 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with young IDP man, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with refugee woman, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 13 June 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, Tanzania, 15 June 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with returnee woman, Rutana Province, 7 June 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with returnee woman, Rutana Province, 9 June 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, Tanzania, 15 June 2016.

"[t]hose who beat him are my neighbours."<sup>57</sup> This has had a profound impact on relationships between individuals, families and communities: "[t]here is no relationship except fear, because we actually can't tell who is an informer and who is genuine... So it is as if no-one is safe."<sup>58</sup> One young man living in Bujumbura said that some of the opposition protesters had "defected and surrendered. These people are dangerous because they are the ones that denounce other people who took part in the riots to the police and army and other groups."<sup>59</sup> As another man said, the ruling party "made people betray others and created suspicions among friends to the point that today everybody is afraid of everybody."<sup>60</sup> This has created deep distrust within communities. One man described how people used to meet around a table with a bottle of beer, "but now people are afraid of meeting places."<sup>61</sup> As another man said, "[p]eople no longer go to the nightclubs. Silence reigns in the area at night. But the silence does not mean that there is calm. Rather, it is a sign of fear. People are just hiding."<sup>62</sup>

At the same time, there were several stories of how local authorities had stood up to the heavy-handedness of the *imbonerakure*. One man told of how "people wanted to force me to become *imbonerakure*. But I reported it to the leader of the *colline*, [local administrative unit] and the matter subsided."<sup>63</sup> Another man, living as a refugee in Nyaragusu, told of how he had managed to escape when the *imbonerakure* came for him: "...the leader of the *colline* came and chased away the *imbonerakure* and the police who were armed. They had come to arrest me even though I am a pastor of the church."<sup>64</sup> Others knew of people who were *imbonerakure* but who were not so brutal: "[w]here I live there was an *imbonerakure*. He was on good terms with us. In the start I did not know that he was *imbonerakure* for he talked to each one of us as normal without discrimination whatsoever. The rioting groups menaced him and he was taken away and saved by his neighbours. Now he has once more dared to visit me, so it means peace is being restored."<sup>65</sup>

For the most part, therefore, while they behaved differently in different areas, it is clear that the *imbonerakure* are greatly feared and, without a doubt, were a primary factor that caused people to flee.

## The police and the army

While the *imbonerakure* featured heavily in many of the interviews as the group that is most feared, those interviewed also feared the police. Some did not see much of a difference between the different forces. As one woman said, "[w]e fear the police, they are brutal ... and *imbonerakure* work closely with the police. I know one *imbonerakure* who thinks

<sup>57</sup> Interview with woman, Makamba Province, 9 June 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with woman, Nyakabiga, Bujumbura, 2 June 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with young man living in Musaga, (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 30 May 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with young IDP man, returnee from Tanzania, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with man, living in Kanyosha, Bujumbura, 31 May 2016.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with young man, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with young man, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 13 June 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with civil society actor, living in Cibitoke, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

that I am a Hutu.<sup>66</sup> From time to time he informs me of what they think and what they aim at doing. So what he says is not encouraging at all. At the same time, we are also afraid of the army. So who protects us?"<sup>67</sup> The police, in particular, were often seen as being one and the same as the *imbonerakure*.

However many did differentiate between the *imbonerakure*, police and army. "[T]he authorities should instruct the police to bring order and security and not use the *imbonerakure* who are illegal. The authorities should stop them



UN Security Council votes on deployment of UN police to Burundi, July 2016,

© UN photo

from persecuting the grassroots people as if they were above the law," said one returnee.<sup>68</sup> In particular, there was frequent mention of the fact that the army provided a check on the abuse of power by the police: "[w]e do not have any relationship with the police apart from the time they came to investigate and ransack my house. When they came, they claimed that they were coming to check and look for rebels, armed groups, and hidden weapons... Nowadays, when the police come to investigate, they are mixed with the army. In the beginning the

police came alone. Police are more ferocious, brutal but the army is negotiable. Most of the police are ferocious. I would say almost 90% of them work badly."<sup>69</sup> Another woman talked of how she feels safer around the army than the police "because the soldiers protect us, but the police come to arrest people and to disturb them. When a police and a soldier are together, we feel safe because they [the police] cannot harm anybody."<sup>70</sup>

Of course, others recognised that the police were not a homogeneous group and that all did not perform in the same way. One woman who was married to a policeman talked of how they feared six specific policemen:

They were famous for killing people. These were the squadron of death. They are the ones that killed people at Mutakura quarter, they killed so many people, and today they cannot go in the open for fear of the population. They fear that there could be retaliation.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup> The *imbonerakure* are almost exclusively seen as Hutu, see section below on ethnic tensions.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with woman living in Ngagara, Bujumbura, 1 June 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with man, returnee and former IDP, Rumonge Province, 28 June 2016.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with man, nurse, living in Musaga (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 2 June 2016.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with female returnee from Tanzania, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with IDP woman, Rumonge Province, 28 June 2016.

While this story shows that not all police behave badly, it was clear that people generally feel threatened, rather than protected, by the police who are mandated to keep them safe. As long as the police are allowed to act with impunity and without sufficient checks and balances on their power, insecurity will continue. As a refugee man said, “[y]ou cannot be bitten by a snake and ask that justice be done by a python.”<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, the more atrocities that are committed, the more those in power have to fear in losing that power in case one day they are held to account for their actions. As he went on to say, “I doubt that the government can agree to enter into real negotiations. They’re afraid that they will be brought to justice.”<sup>73</sup>

## Rumours of war and prophecies

While many fled because they were specifically targeted, others fled out of fear of the crisis escalating. The demonstrations in Bujumbura were seen by many as a potential pre-cursor to war, generating fear amongst a population that has witnessed war before. As a woman living in Rutana Province said, “[w]hen I learned that there was a coup, I felt lost and I crossed the border. I was worried about the children – you can’t flee fast when you have children, and I was worried that if I left it, it would be too late for me to escape.”<sup>74</sup> Or, as another woman living in Nyaragusu refugee camp said, “I thought that if what was happening in Bujumbura would also happen in Rumonge, we would all die so I decided to flee.”<sup>75</sup>

Some referred to the fact that they fled because others were fleeing. As one woman said, “[w]e fled only because of conflicting information passing over the radios. Nobody forced us to flee. We mostly got scared when the people of Nyanza-Lac Commune passed here to escape.”<sup>76</sup> An elderly woman who had been displaced twice previously, and has subsequently returned, told of why she fled: “I was left alone in this whole village while all my neighbours had all left, fled. ... I was the last one to leave this area.”<sup>77</sup>

In addition, many interviewees heard rumours that the situation would worsen, intensifying their fear. An internally displaced woman told of why she fled her home in Nyanza-Lac: “I am a widow, and everywhere there were rumours and many people including my neighbours were leaving the area... Because of fear, I decided to flee as well.”<sup>78</sup>

In addition to rumours, a number of prophecies, made by individuals claiming some sort of religious or spiritual power, were circulating prior to and during the demonstrations. One man living in Bujumbura described the prophecies:

<sup>72</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 16 June 2016.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 16 June 2016.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with female returnee from Tanzania, Rutana Province, 7 June 2016.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with refugee woman, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 13 June 2016.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with woman, Makamba Province, 11 June 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with elderly woman, Makamba Province, 11 June 2016.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with internally displaced woman, Makamba Province, 9 June 2016.

I really believed the prophecies that were prophesied before the crisis. I heard of Gakwaya Damascene, a Rwandan, and he is the more known prophet who prophesied on Burundi. I also know Ndayishimiye Daniel from Shinyanga and I nearly succumbed to his prophecies on Burundi as well. I read more of his writings on the doom of Burundi and the current President. When people heard of those two prophets through leaflets through WhatsApp or YouTube, there are portions of what they said that have taken place in Burundi... Definitely these prophecies made people flee and others not to flee as well.<sup>79</sup>

The prophecies apparently predicted wide-scale blood-shed, and specified that “only refugees, the remnant, will be sheltered from the awful things that were going to befall Burundi as a country. These awful dooms prophesied over Burundi led me to flee the country before it was too late.”<sup>80</sup> However, while some believed them, others were sceptical. In particular, some interviewees were convinced that there was a political motivation behind them and that they were being used by the opposition to encourage people to flee. As one man said, “people are asking why most of those prophets came from Rwanda. It makes us think that the crisis and riots were masterminded from Rwanda.”<sup>81</sup>

What cannot be denied, however, is that the broader context of fear with which people were living created fertile ground for rumours and prophecies. As one interviewee said when asked why the prophets had such a strong impact, “[b]ecause people were so tired and confused therefore they wanted something to release their fear.”<sup>82</sup> They were also received in a context in which people were not able to access credible information due to a growing media crackdown, and in which people were feeling increasingly unsure about who to look to for protection, further enhancing their impact.

**“You cannot be bitten by a snake and ask that justice be done by a python.”**

## Historical precedent

Many referred to their previous experience of political violence and displacement as critical to their understanding of the current situation. Time and again, interviewees talked of the precedent set by previous episodes of violence in which political repression was a pre-cursor to war. The extent to which these previous rounds of violence – whether the identity-based killings in 1972, or the decade-long civil war in the 1990s – weighed on people’s minds signifies the extent to which they do not see drivers of these conflicts as having been sufficiently addressed. The speed and scale of displacement from the country, therefore, has to be understood in the context of previous rounds of violence.

As an elderly refugee man said, “I have spent the better part of my life in exile. Back in 1972 both of my parents, my two uncles, and my other relatives were killed. So now, when I hear about war, and killings, I straight away recall the

<sup>79</sup> Interview with man, nurse, living in Musaga, (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 2 June 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with young man, returnee from Tanzania, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with man living in Nkenga Busoro, Bujumbura, 1 June 2016.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with displaced man living in Bujumbura, 31 May 2016.



past and just pack and leave. I do not take chances. I must be mindful of what I hear.”<sup>83</sup> Likewise a man who lost his wife and six of his nine children in 1993 said: “[w]hen I remembered what happened to me in the past, I decided to flee with my children and my wife [in May 2015]. This time I was not going to wait to see... I was traumatised from before, so I decided to flee earlier before I was caught up in the crisis.”<sup>84</sup>

In particular, the violence of 1972, which many see as genocide, continues to weigh heavily on people’s minds. As a refugee woman said:

I remembered what happened before in Burundi. In my land in Dama, when I was cultivating, I would dig out bones – it was where they had gathered dead bodies in mass graves in 1965... Then in 1972 I saw such awful things again, and could not wait and prepare for my flight... Then I fled again in 1993 and spent 19 years in exile. So in answer to your question, no, I just fled without making any preparation. I had seen such things since my early childhood so how could I wait? I know the consequences of war.<sup>85</sup>

For others, especially those who were not yet born in the early 1970s, the events of the early 1990s had shaped their decisions. As one man said “[i]t is all about the history of what happened in 1993. That time it started like rumours but it ended up in the whole country being in war... I decided to flee and not to be killed like my parents.”<sup>86</sup>

## Cycles of displacement and poverty

While fear of insecurity appeared to play a major role in determining whether or not individuals would flee, the findings also show that economic insecurity was also a significant factor. While it is hard, if not impossible, to disassociate broader issues of fear of a political crisis that might unravel with the terrible poverty people were facing both prior to and as a result of the crisis, some identified economic hardship as a key push factor. In the words of one young man who fled to Nyaragusu refugee camp to find his parents “because I had problems finding food... it was not because of war” but then decided to return to continue his studies “because in the camps, people are just unemployed.”<sup>87</sup> He is now managing to go to school three days a week, and during the other days he works. It is barely enough, but he is determined not to allow the crisis to interrupt his education. While economic factors for flight are often seen in opposition to political factors, these were seen as integrated by some in the Burundi context: “[o]ne is poverty: People are poor, and many people, especially young people are jobless, idle. So anything that can occupy them, good or bad, is embraced. The government is not fair in the way it gives employment to people...”<sup>88</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Interview with elderly refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 13 June 2016.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with elderly man, Makamba Province, 10 June 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with refugee woman, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 13 June 2016.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with man, Makamba Province, 10 June 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with young man, Makamba Province, 9 June 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with refugee pastor, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 16 June 2016.

Few, however, cited poverty as their primary reason for fleeing, although it was cited alongside political difficulties. This might be because they are aware of the perception that those fleeing economic difficulties are not eligible for refugee status, or it might be because their economic difficulties were not the primary reason for fleeing. Alternatively, it could be that those who are more vulnerable economically also feel more vulnerable to the insecurity, or that they have less reason to stay.

**“I had seen such things since my early childhood so how could I wait? I know the consequences of war.”**

Some did acknowledge a positive desire to return to Tanzania, either because they had returned to Burundi as a result of pressure as opposed to desire to do so, or because the situation there compared positively to what they found on return. For example, one refugee said, “[m]any of us here had wished to remain in Tanzania. Now we are trying to see if there could be a second chance...”<sup>89</sup>

Some speculated that the demonstrations were an opportunity that would give them the legitimacy to return to Tanzania. As one man said:

... some people were saying that it is better we leave this country in order to see if we can get a better life elsewhere. They said that since there is no land for cultivation, the protests and riots were a great opportunity and an excuse to leave the country to get big lands in Tanzania or they may be given a Tanzanian citizenship. Apparently some of those who had previously fled for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> time were thinking that UNHCR would give them resettlement opportunities in other foreign countries, where their lives will be much better.<sup>90</sup>

There was also frequent mention of high levels of unemployment. In particular, many of the young people interviewed expressed their frustration at the lack of opportunities: “[l]ife is not easy and we are only just surviving – we eat just once a day even though I am sitting with my diploma. It is indeed a shame!”<sup>91</sup> In Burundi, there are few alternatives to small-scale farming and serious land shortages.

Furthermore, it was striking that many of those interviewed who had decided to flee had previously been displaced; while many who had decided to stay had not. It was also recognised that previous rounds of displacement had only exacerbated poverty. With each round of displacement, people’s assets had been reduced further and their coping mechanisms undermined. While that is not to suggest that those who did not flee previously are not also facing terrible hardship, it was clear that displacement had placed an additional strain on individuals and families. “[i]t is not easy for somebody to keep fleeing every year, moving around all the time, because he will not live a normal life. He will not reach anywhere in terms of development. It is not good to be a refugee.”<sup>92</sup> As another man who has now been displaced for the third time in his life said: “I am tired of this constant displacement. Can you imagine that I had to

<sup>89</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 16 June 2016.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with man, Rutana Province, 7 June 2016.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with woman, recently returned from Tanzania, Nyakabiga, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 14 June 2016.

build myself a house last time I returned? And here I am again back in exile!”<sup>93</sup> When they fled many had to sell assets at a low price. As one man said, “I sold a rice field, another of taro and sweet potatoes a third of which were to mature within less than one month. I also sold my two fish ponds and sugar canes around them. I tried to sell everything before leaving for Tanzania because I needed the money.”<sup>94</sup>

The extent to which displacement increases vulnerability is exacerbated where previous reintegration efforts have been mismanaged. Not surprisingly, access to land was key in this regard, as discussed in greater detail below. As a refugee man said, “[w]hen I repatriated [from Mtabila refugee camp, Tanzania] in 2009, I found that my land had been given to returnees from Katumba refugee camp [in Tanzania which was set up in 1972]. I had papers of my property, I went to Bujumbura many times, but I did not get back my property.”<sup>95</sup> As another man in Nyaragusu camp said, “[s]ince I came back to Burundi, I never had peace. The repatriates were never accepted. So when we heard that in Bujumbura protests were going on, I decided to leave immediately.”<sup>96</sup> The crisis was the final straw for many who had been struggling for years to reintegrate both economically and politically, pushing them back into exile.

**“I am tired of this constant displacement. Can you imagine that I had to build myself a house last time I returned? And here I am again back in exile!”**

In other words, poverty appears to have influenced flight in two ways. First, political and economic marginalisation often went hand in hand: perceived government discrimination in jobs and mismanagement of land issues were seen to exclude those on the political margins. At the same time, flight presented a potential solution for some whose lives were unviable in Burundi. In the short-term Tanzania was seen to offer the hope of humanitarian assistance; and in the long-term it held out the potential for a genuinely durable solution to their exile in the form of local integration or resettlement – albeit solutions that are likely to elude them given that the recent trend of Tanzanian government policy; and resettlement continues to be something of a lottery with numbers painfully small.

## Staying behind

Although many people did flee, many others did not. While for some, previous experience was a reason to flee, for others, it was a reason *not* to do so. These people calculated that they were better off staying in their homes. As a woman living in Bujumbura said, “I didn’t flee. I was displaced from 1993 to 2013, and life was very hard – my children were forced from one place to another, and I didn’t want that to happen again. Also, I didn’t want to lose everything

<sup>93</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 13 June 2016.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 16 June 2016.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 13 June 2016.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 16 June 2016.

I have built up here.”<sup>97</sup> A man who had fled said that his parents had refused to do so because of their past experience of displacement: “[t]hey would rather opt for suicide or death on the spot rather than returning into exile.”<sup>98</sup>

**“[t]hey would rather opt for suicide or death on the spot rather than returning into exile”**

Others did not flee because they had heard about the lack of humanitarian assistance and the terrible conditions in which refugees were living. A widow said, “[t]here is nothing more discouraging than to see your children starving and dying of diseases in a refugee camp. So it takes courage to resist fleeing... I know a man who fled with his wife and seven children. Now, he returned with only three children. His wife and four children all died in the refugee camp.”<sup>99</sup> Another man told of how three of his children had died of sickness in the camp.<sup>100</sup> Another described the situation facing his family in Nyaragusu refugee camp: “[w]e are leading a difficult life here. The beans are tough to cook and the peas are making my children sick.”<sup>101</sup> A number of refugees pointed to the negative impact of the lack of freedom of movement for those in the camps: “we’re not allowed to leave the camp to find work and earn some money to supplement the family diet. Refugees are taken straight to jail when they are caught by the police trying to leave the camp without permission.”<sup>102</sup> One woman, who had recently returned to Bujumbura from the camps in Tanzania told how her relatives in camps keep asking her to send them money “even though I don’t have any.”<sup>103</sup> Given these poor conditions, a number preferred to wait and see in Burundi. As a man in Rutana Province said: “I heard that in the camps children were dying in large numbers. That’s why we preferred to wait to see the developments of the crisis. We said that as long as the war will not be declared in Rutana Province, we’ll stay.”<sup>104</sup>

Others did not flee because they did not have the means. This was particularly the case for those who did not want to go to the camps. A widow living in Nyakabiga in Bujumbura, when asked why she did not flee, answered: “I was ready to flee and I had already made preparations, but I didn’t have money for transport and the means of survival in exile.”<sup>105</sup> She and several other interviewees said some neighbours had recently returned from Rwanda because they ran out of money.

Others did not flee because they did not know where to go. A man living in Bujumbura told of how he could not go to Rwanda because he is not Tutsi, and he had heard that those Hutu who fled there were labelled *imbonerakure* whilst in exile and rebels in Burundi at the point of return. But he did not want to risk going to the camps in Tanzania either because of the terrible living conditions. As a result, he decided to stay.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Interview with woman, Jabe, Bujumbura, 31 May 2016.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 13 June 2016.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with woman, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with man, Makamba Province, 10 June 2016.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, Tanzania, 16 June 2016.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with woman, recently returned from Tanzania, Nyakabiga, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with man, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with woman, Nyakabiga, Bujumbura, 2 June 2016.

<sup>106</sup> Interview with man living in Nkenga Busoro, Bujumbura, 1 June 2016.

Another key reason why people did not flee was because they did not want to interrupt their education. One man who had recently returned from Tanzania where he fled in May 2015, said his son was the only member of the family who did not flee because he did not want to leave school. “I told him the background, the past and history of the country of Burundi and all that happened including people who died around such circumstances as the ones we were living. But he decided to stay on.”<sup>107</sup>

## When and if to return?

Decisions around whether or not to flee in the first place, whether to stay in exile or whether – and when – to return, are highly complex, particularly in a situation of limited resources and ongoing instability. Although exact figures are hard to ascertain, it is clear that a significant number of those who initially fled have subsequently returned. These



*Burundi, February 2016 © IRRI*

returns have been “unofficial” inasmuch as they have not been supported by either the government or the international community, and refugees have had to pay their own way.

Some of those who have returned, particularly in the countryside, have done so as a result of increasing security. One woman told of how she had repatriated after four months because “I was told [by my husband who had stayed behind] that there is enough security.”<sup>108</sup> Another woman said that she sees the

current situation as secure enough for her to stay in Burundi because

“now no-one sleeps in the forest, and people stay out drinking at night.”<sup>109</sup>

This perception, however, varied based on the specific location and the person. Many refugees continued to perceive the situation as insecure in some areas, especially Bujumbura. As a refugee said: “[a]lthough in Nyanza-Lac there have not been people who died, we hear that in Bujumbura people are still being killed, kidnapped, arrested. For us to go back, we need to not hear this. After all, these people are our neighbours, our friends, our fellow Burundians.”<sup>110</sup> In the neighbourhoods in Bujumbura that were at the centre of the protests, few had returned at the time of the research. As one woman said, “[w]here we moved to [elsewhere in Bujumbura] we had to rent the house we are living in. Unfortunately, our house we left in Cibitoke is not rented out. In fact, nobody rents a house in Cibitoke, almost all

<sup>107</sup> Interview with man, Makamba Province, 10 June 2016.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with woman, Makamba Province, 9 June 2016.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with woman, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 14 June 2016.

the houses in Cibitoke are empty.”<sup>111</sup> Another told us that property owners returned, but renters have not.<sup>112</sup> Key informants have, however, reported that conditions in these areas have improved since the time of the research.

In addition, fears of escalation persist. As one woman said, “[t]here are people preparing for war and very soon it is going to explode because there are fighters who are getting themselves ready. This is why some refugees don’t want to repatriate.” When asked the source of this information, she said that she had spoken to a fighter.<sup>113</sup> Another man saw security as related to how refugees would be received on return, “[w]e need to hear that when somebody repatriates he is welcomed and not suspected.”<sup>114</sup>

Some also expressed concern about the extent to which staying in exile could undermine their security, not least as there was a keen awareness that exile was associated with rebel groups. As one man explained, “[a]lthough we [who were in exile in Tanzania before] were labelled PALIPEHUTU [the political party now known as the FNL], I do not belong to any political party.”<sup>115</sup> Others alleged that the government of Burundi had sent spies into the camps to check up on them, reinforcing fear of return.

A further complicating factor for both refugees considering return and others considering flight was the difficulty in accessing accurate and trustworthy information. While many listen to the radio and speak with relatives at home or abroad, they are still unsure. As one refugee man told us, “[n]obody can tell you the real situation of Burundi on the phone for fear of being heard or monitored.”<sup>116</sup> Others told of how rumours continue to circulate in the refugee camps, often seemingly substantiated by the stories of those who continue to flee and arrive in the camps.

An additional core concern was the availability of humanitarian assistance, with some telling of how they had returned due to lack of assistance in exile. As one man said, “[t]hey have no choice but to return. The great problem of exile is that you have to beg for assistance when you were able to provide for your own needs.”<sup>117</sup>

While for some the dismal conditions in refugee camps were a push to return, concerns about the availability of assistance at home were also a barrier to return. One man said: “[f]or us to repatriate, we need to hear that aid has resumed for grassroots people.”<sup>118</sup> Others were living with the tantalising knowledge that they *had* assets at home that they could be benefitting from, but still felt unable to return. A man who is now in exile for the fourth time in his life broke down in tears when he said, “I am fed up with this recurrent fleeing and repatriation... Here I sit in a camp, while my palm oil trees in Nyanza-Lac are ready for harvesting. Now I won’t get anything from them.”<sup>119</sup>

---

<sup>111</sup> Interview with displaced young woman, Kigobe, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with woman, member of opposition, living in Musaga, (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 31 May 2016.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with woman, recently returned from Tanzania, Nyakabiga, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 15 June 2016.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 14 June 2016.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 13 June 2016.

<sup>117</sup> Interview with man, Kanyoshe, Bujumbura, 31 May 2016.

<sup>118</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 15 June 2016.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 14 June 2016.

Making the decision to return also has financial implications, which makes it a risky strategy if the durability of return is uncertain. According to one woman: “[t]here are neighbours and relatives who had fled and are still in Nyarugusu refugee camp. It is difficult to come back for one has to pay for his/her own ticket. For all my two kids and I, we paid 62,000 BIF (about USD \$37). I left all I possessed in the refugee camp with my relatives who stayed in the camp.”<sup>120</sup> One woman living in Rutana Province described refugees returning in a terrible state: “These refugees are usually poor and they arrive on foot. Others wear unwashed clothes. Really, these are poor people who come to us from the refugee camps in Tanzania.”<sup>121</sup> Many, therefore, saw return without sufficient humanitarian assistance as unviable.

**“[u]nless they use force as they did in Mtabila in 2012, I won’t go back. I have suffered enough; I want to remain in exile.”**

At the same time, aside from the immediate needs of security and assistance, people want a political solution to what they perceive to be a political crisis. In the words of one man: “[f]or me to repatriate, the Arusha peace accord will be adhered to. There should be negotiations and true ones, by the way, between warring parties, there should be restoration of peace and security.”<sup>122</sup> For some, resolution appeared to equate with the removal of the current regime. As one woman living in

Makamba Province said, “[t]here are many who say they will stay [in exile] until the five years of the current president’s mandate are over.”<sup>123</sup>

Some, however, said they would never return: “[u]nless they use force as they did in Mtabila in 2012, I won’t go back. I have suffered enough; I want to remain in exile.”<sup>124</sup> Several refugees said that they wanted start again: “I want to stay in exile and see if I can take my children to good schools, and find somewhere I can go and live peacefully and forget about my country.”<sup>125</sup> As a refugee woman said, “[i]f I am forced back to Burundi, I will go but not to stay. I assure you that I will only be in transit.”<sup>126</sup> Many of those who had been born in Tanzania during previous cycles of exile and had never wanted to leave Tanzania, have now had enough: “[i]f I do not repatriate soon, I will bear with the life I am living. After all, I was born in exile, I prefer to stay here rather than repatriate and flee again.”<sup>127</sup>

The decisions that people are making regarding whether or not to return, therefore, are clearly based on very small margins. People are being forced to weigh up the threat faced by the terrible conditions in the camps and the knowledge that whatever assets they left at home might be compromised, against the potential for safety and access to livelihoods at home. Furthermore, at the back of everyone’s minds is the persistent fear that the situation could still tip over into civil war. The majority of those who fled, therefore, remain in exile.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with woman, Makamba Province, 9 June 2016.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with woman, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 14 June 2016.

<sup>123</sup> Interview with woman, Makamba Province, 10 June 2016.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 13 June 2016.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 14 June 2016.

<sup>126</sup> Interview with refugee woman, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 15 June 2016.

<sup>127</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 16 June 2016.

## Returning – but to what?

It is clear that some wish to return and desperately need assistance to do this in such a way as to not make their economic situation even worse. To date, such assistance appears not to be on offer. One man recounted: “[w]e kept pressing UNHCR to repatriate us. UNHCR told us to register at least 200 people who were ready to repatriate so that it could find a vehicle for them. Unfortunately we could not get this number. The camp manager said that he had not yet received permission to release the refugees to go back home.”<sup>128</sup> As a result, he made his own way back. “UNHCR has not initiated repatriation activities. Therefore, to leave the camp and travel to Burundi, if you have six children, requires a lot of funds. So many refugees have no choice but to stay in the camp.”<sup>129</sup> While the hesitance of UNHCR is understandable given that providing assistance for return could be read as endorsing the safety of the process and/or suggesting that *all* of the refugees should return home because some wish to (and, in fact, UNHCR is often criticised for pushing repatriation processes prematurely), those who want to return, but are unable to, feel frustrated.

At the same time, there was a recognition that repatriation in the current circumstances is sub-optimal, and is more related to the hardships in exile than a conducive situation at home. The interviews showed that not only do refugees recognise the need for basic assistance with the costs of transport for themselves and their assets, they also need to know that there is a process in place for their re-inclusion into the country. Ensuring that processes are in place for individuals to regain their property, or access fair compensation where this is not possible, was seen as crucial.

In this regard, some refugees recognised with appreciation that the current president had vowed to protect refugee properties. In the words of one woman: “If it was not his speech, people would not hesitate to steal.”<sup>130</sup> In practice, however, those who had returned gave mixed reports. Some returned to find that their properties were secure and that neither their houses nor their fields had been robbed. Not surprisingly, those who had left behind at least one member of their family to look after their assets were more likely to find all in order. One woman, who fled to Tanzania but then returned, said: “[w]e had no problem coming back here on our land. We all know here, because we all come from the same hill in Bururi Commune. We have therefore no conflict between each other. I found all my things here safe.”<sup>131</sup> Others had left someone guarding their property, particularly in the areas where there are palm trees growing: “those with palm plantations have rented them or have entrusted them to guards who watch over them during their absence.”<sup>132</sup> Another refugee had learned that his house had been “ransacked by thieves” and now has a watchman “who guards my house and I have to pay him from here!”<sup>133</sup> In some cases, property had fallen victim to disuse, with their houses and land destroyed by “wind, rain and termites”<sup>134</sup> in their absence.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with man, Makamba Province, 10 June 2016.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with woman, Makamba Province, 11 June 2016.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with woman, Makamba Province, 9 June 2016.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with woman, Makamba Province, 11 June 2016.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with young man, Makamba Province, 10 June 2016.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 13 June 2016.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with woman, Rutana Province, 7 June 2016.



More often, however, were stories of people returning to find their houses and fields looted. Some talked of this as being the work of criminals who had taken advantage of the situation, particularly in Bujumbura. As a pastor living in Musaga said, “criminals also take advantage of the situation to steal property using firearms. This kind of crime has become commonplace.”<sup>135</sup> In other cases it was neighbours – or even members of their family – who had taken advantage of refugees’ absence. As



*Burundian refugees in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 2015*

© MONUSCO

a woman in Makamba Province said, “[o]n my return I found nothing in my house. My neighbours stole everything, including the beans in the fields... My father and my brother also took advantage of my absence to tear my cassava plants.”<sup>136</sup> An elderly woman described the same: “[w]hen I came back, I found everything has been stolen, including the doors of my house and all my belongings. Even in the fields, people looted and stole and harvested the cassava I had planted.”<sup>137</sup>

While the harvesting of people’s fields in their absence is complex in a context in which people are short of food, and sooner or later unharvested crops would become useless to anyone, of primary concern to many of those interviewed was the fact that the looting and lack of respect for other people’s properties pointed to a deeper crisis of trust within and between communities. In some cases, the authorities themselves were accused. One young man replied, when asked about the belongings of those who have fled: “I do not know any house belonging to refugees that has been burgled. But sometimes the police, under the pretext of ensuring security, can break down the doors. It is in these kinds of searches that some goods can be stolen.”<sup>138</sup> As another young man said, “[t]he problem we have now is that many people suspect each other as thieves. And others are suspected of hiding weapons. Still others are saying they are *imbonerakure*, and so they can do whatever they want.”<sup>139</sup> As a returnee in Rumonge said, “[t]he government should compensate the things that were stolen.”<sup>140</sup>

<sup>135</sup> Interview with man, living in Musaga, (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 31 May 2016.

<sup>136</sup> Interview with woman, Makamba Province, 9 June 2016.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with elderly woman, Makamba Province, 11 June 2016.

<sup>138</sup> Interview with young man living in Bwiza, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

<sup>139</sup> Interview with young man, Makamba Province, 9 June 2016.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with man, Rumonge Province, 28 June 2016.

Ultimately, therefore, the treatment of returnees is going to be a key indicator that not only has stability returned to Burundi, but that this stability might be durable. While the government's efforts at protection of property are laudable, it is clear that they are insufficient, and more must be done. The government and the international community must work together to ensure that a comprehensive strategy, encompassing both immediate humanitarian needs and longer term issues of reintegration, are addressed.

## Perspectives on the crisis

The perspectives of those interviewed not only gave insight into their own decision-making about whether to stay or flee, it also gave a perspective on the way in which they viewed the crisis. In particular, the research found that people see the crisis as primarily political rather than ethnic. However, given the extent to which politics and ethnicity have historically been intertwined in Burundi, this is not to say that there is no ethnic dimension, simply that it is not seen as the primary fault line. In addition, the crisis was seen as one that had to be viewed in light of the historical context. Just as previous rounds of displacement have shaped individual views on the viability of flight as an option, the previous experience of conflict has shaped individual views on this crisis. Finally, the importance of the issue of land was highlighted.

## A deeply political crisis

Those living in, and exiled from, Burundi viewed the crisis as primarily a political one. The issue of the third term was seen as a spark, rather than the core, of the problem. As one man living in Nyaragusu refugee camp said, the "issue of the 3<sup>rd</sup> term revealed what people were suffering from and sitting on. It was like a bomb that was ready to burst any time. And it exploded."<sup>141</sup> Likewise a civil society activist described the issue of the third term as an "igniting factor." He then went on to talk about the fact that the real problem was "the arrogance, intransigence, lack of dialogue that characterised the ruling party... there was no room for competition."<sup>142</sup> People emphasised the lack of political space for anyone who disagreed with the government as being a key component that led to the crisis. As a refugee man said in frustration, "[i]f the government had just talked to the opposition long ago, we would not be refugees today."<sup>143</sup> The core issues were seen as structural problems that have remained unaddressed in Burundi. These included the government's failure to address injustices that lay at the heart of decades of conflict that has led to a chronic deficit in civic trust; the failure to re-absorb hundreds of thousands of refugees and IDPs who had been living in external or internal exile for years or even decades; and the extent to which access to political power remains the key route to accessing resources which are, by any standards, in extremely short supply.

---

<sup>141</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 16 June 2016.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with civil society actor, living in Cibitoke, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

<sup>143</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 13 June 2016.

As a result, while people might technically be called citizens of Burundi, most are disappointed by the lack of substance to their citizenship. Worse still, many of those who have spoken out against these injustices have become victimised by the same state that was supposed to protect them. As another refugee said, “[t]here is nothing good that the ruling party has done. It has only widowed me and forced me to go in exile.”<sup>144</sup> The hope that had accompanied the end of the civil war has faded. As a member of the opposition said, when asked why she joined an opposition party: “[w]hen CNDD-FDD came into power in Burundi after a long struggle, we thought they were going to change things that had rotted in Burundi... Instead, whatever they agreed in the bush, they never implemented it. They excluded everybody who was not in their political sphere, and they killed or imprisoned their opponents who were not with them.”<sup>145</sup> This consequent frustration and anger was tangible throughout the interviews.

## Disillusionment with *all* politicians

However, it was not just the government that people were disillusioned with. It was all politicians. In particular, there was considerable anger amongst those interviewed who had taken part in the demonstrations at the way in which the opposition leaders had, in their opinion, abandoned them by fleeing the country. A displaced man formerly from Cibitoke expressed his anger that opposition parties had seemingly abandoned their followers who could not afford to flee: “[o]pposition parties have used people, especially the youth. They left them in the streets while the leaders fled the country leaving those people they instigated to suffer in the hands of the police. When things became hot, they dumped them.”<sup>146</sup> This was echoed by a woman, herself an opposition party member: “[m]ost of the initiators of the crisis fled the country and live in luxury in Europe while we are left to suffer and reap the consequences of the fire they ignited.”<sup>147</sup> As another man said, “[the opposition] are divided and running after their own survival. They have no clear agenda to save the country.”<sup>148</sup>

One experience that fed this type of frustration can be summed up in the story of a young IDP man who told how he had been lured by promises of 50,000 BIF (about USD 30) and “some rice and beans”, to join the armed opposition. He was given “military training and taught how to handle weapons, and then we were told to go and destabilise security.” He estimates that 20 out of their group of 75 were killed during the riots, “and they did not even give us a salary.” He talked of how he now feels traumatised because he is not able to go back to Bujumbura to be with his family, and he cannot do anything to support them financially. As he concluded, “[i]n Bujumbura we were lured by the opposition to do things we did not understand. Now I have lost everything, so how can I agree with them, be it the ruling party or the opposition?”<sup>149</sup>

**“All politicians are liars.”**

<sup>144</sup> Interview with refugee woman, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 16 June 2016.

<sup>145</sup> Interview with female politician, Musaga, (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 31 May 2016.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with displaced man, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with female politician, Musaga, (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 31 May 2016.

<sup>148</sup> Interview with IDP man, Rumonge Province, 28 June 2016.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

Throughout the interviews, therefore, there was a tangible level of anger and frustration that those who seek political office do so for their own good and not for the good of the citizens they claim to represent:

The government is selfish, and the opposition is selfish. They have never given us peace. Think of my family! One of my children was born on the roadside when we were fleeing, and most of them have not studied; not because I did not have money to educate them but because they were destabilised whenever they started school. Now I am in the hands of UNHCR as long as it has not yet chased us and is still supporting us with the little it gives us.<sup>150</sup>

Laying the blame squarely at the feet of political actors, many expressed the opinion that the country lacks credible leadership. As a result, many are disillusioned with politics and do not want to have anything to do with the political elite. Yet, of course, their lives continue to be hugely affected by the decisions and actions of these leaders: "I do not even have a radio, yet I suffer from the consequences of bad leadership to the point of leaving my own country and being a refugee in another country."<sup>151</sup>

This lack of faith is further undermined by the lack of trust in the security forces, driven by the perception of prevalent corruption. Several interviewees talked of the fact that, it is possible to buy the release of targeted individuals from jail. As a pastor living in Musaga said, "[t]hose who are caught [arrested] are asked to pay a certain amount. I know two such young people in my neighbourhood who were arrested. Their family paid a ransom of 250,000 BIF (approximately USD 150) for each to be released. Then they sent them into exile."<sup>152</sup> Another man told of how he secured the release of one man by "bribing" the police:

It is sad that today arresting people and imprisoning them has become a lucrative business as people have to bribe to get back their people from custody. There are some brutal police and intelligence workers who go as far as asking 3,000,000 BIF (approximately USD 1,800).<sup>153</sup>

One woman suggested that police were driven to this: "I have a feeling that the police are also struggling with a lot of poverty and that is why they are extorting the same poor people for survival."<sup>154</sup> As several people were quick to point out, this is not law and order; it is extortion. With the government failing to protect many of its own citizens, and with an opposition that has fled the country – albeit with little alternative – people are feeling abandoned, and are utterly disillusioned with those who are in, or who are seeking, political office. As a man living in hiding in Bujumbura put it, "[a]ll politicians are liars."<sup>155</sup>

<sup>150</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 13 June 2016.

<sup>151</sup> Interview with woman, Makamba Province, 9 June 2016.

<sup>152</sup> Interview with man, living in Musaga, (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 31 May 2016.

<sup>153</sup> Interview with man, living in Musaga (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 2 June 2016.

<sup>154</sup> Interview with woman, Nyakabiga, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

<sup>155</sup> Interview with man, Makamba Province, 10 June 2016.

## Ethnic tension

A key component to understanding the nature of power and the way it has been deployed in Burundi is the issue of ethnicity. Given the country's history of violence targeted along ethnic lines, from the 1972 violence which is often called genocide to the civil war in the 1990s, the fear that political repression could spill over into ethnically-aligned violence is very real. Yet these dynamics have to be carefully understood. For most of those interviewed, the key driver of violence is the abuse of power. And while the organisation of this power has an ethnic dimension to it, for most of those interviewed, the current crisis was primarily about the abuse of political power *regardless* of ethnicity. As one man who identified himself as a Tutsi said, “[t]o tell you the truth, this crisis has never been a fight between the Hutus and the Tutsis. This is not an ethnic war. It is a war of political ideas, a political war, not a civil or ethnic one. If this war was ethnic, be in no doubt that I would have had to escape long ago.”<sup>156</sup> Or as a refugee man said, “[t]he problems in Burundi are not based on an ethnic struggle... It is a war between politicians and nothing more! There is only a struggle between politicians who are selfish, just wanting to enrich themselves by forgetting their countrymen.”<sup>157</sup> An opposition member said “we were told to demonstrate against the third term of the current President. Let me assure you that the rioters were both Hutu and Tutsi.”<sup>158</sup> People were clear that the current crisis had started off unequivocally as a political fight.

And yet, it is equally clear that there is an underlying ethnic dynamic at play, particularly in a context in which both the ruling party and its most feared weapon, the *imbonerakure*, are associated almost exclusively as Hutu. And some reported that the government is intentionally seeking to exploit ethnic difference to their advantage, even if they are meeting with some resistance on the part of the population. As a refugee woman said:

If I analyse the situation in Burundi, it is said that it was the Tutsi who misled the Hutu by turning against them to win back power. Such was the teaching of the ruling CNDD-FDD party. This is the message that is conveyed by the *imbonerakure* youth... But this message does not work with us here. At the port of Kagunga, people said that they were fleeing the bad governance of the ruling power and the abuses by *imbonerakure* to the point that they act as police and soldiers of the country. It is not ethnicity.<sup>159</sup>

As a result, the balance of power between the *imbonerakure* and other local leaders is of crucial importance – a potential and actual antidote to the escalation of the crisis into widespread violence or war. By way of an example, a man living in Rutana Province talked about the balance of power between the *imbonerakure* and local leaders:

The *imbonerakure* youth are mono-ethnic. They are all Hutu. That worries me. But otherwise in all other instances of the administration, there are representatives from the two ethnic groups. There used to be night

<sup>156</sup> Interview with man, Musaga, (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 31 May 2016.

<sup>157</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 14 June 2016.

<sup>158</sup> Interview with young IDP man, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>159</sup> Interview with refugee woman, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 14 June 2016.

patrols by [*imbonerakure*], but then we had a meeting with the local authorities. He told us to report any young person who behaves badly. Since then, the night patrols of these young people have decreased significantly. At the same time, the police chief has said that there is no permission for these young people to patrol, except for the police and the army.<sup>160</sup>

Yet equally, there was recognition that ethnicity could be used as a tool for mobilisation to violence. Indeed, while local leaders, especially given their ethnic balance can act as a breaker against ethnicisation, the very fact that the *imbonerakure* has been created outside these structures shows the risk of destabilising ethnic relations. Ethnicity has been mobilised for violence before and given the general perception of politicians as unscrupulous, there is fear that they could attempt this mobilisation again: “[t]oday, the crisis is not a result of ethnicity or tribalism. But some politicians are trying to manipulate people and make them think that the problem is tribalism as it used to be in the past.”<sup>161</sup> Others, however, pointed to social resilience. As one man said, “[i]t is only politicians who want to make the crisis ethnic in order to get some gains out of it, but it won’t stand... Some people have warned of genocide in Burundi. I am a Tutsi, but I assure you that there cannot be genocide in Burundi for Hutu and Tutsi alike cannot accept that such an evil will happen in Burundi.”<sup>162</sup>

Whether or not the current political crisis will mutate into an ethnically-aligned one is hard to predict. On the one hand, it is by no means a foregone conclusion. The ethnic quota system within the military and elsewhere in government, as outlined in the Arusha Agreement, have certainly created a level of cohesion. Yet the Arusha Agreement itself seems increasingly fragile. The government’s rhetoric has increasingly questioned the Arusha Agreement and its efforts at constitutional reform, if successful, could renegotiate the basic terms of the Arusha Agreement. If that happens, it is unclear what the impact would be. The country’s history, therefore, hangs heavily the air.

**“[i]t is only politicians who want to make the crisis ethnic in order to get some gains out of it, but it won’t stand...”**

## A crisis brewing for years

Many talked of the fact that prior to 2010, progress had been made in generating a viable polity. As one man said, “[b]efore, they did well, schools, clinics and roads were built. Now they have led the country into total insecurity.”<sup>163</sup> However, after the 2010 elections, people noticed an increasing contraction on political space. As a woman who is a member of an opposition party said: “[b]efore 2010, we did not have any problem. But when votes were stolen [in 2010] and political parties were divided by the ruling party, things started to go wrong. We were forbidden to organise meetings and campaigns. We were obliged to work in hiding. At the same time, we were not rich enough to make

<sup>160</sup> Interview with man, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>161</sup> Interview with man, living in Kanyosha, Bujumbura, 31 May 2016.

<sup>162</sup> Interview with young IDP man, Rutana Province.

<sup>163</sup> Interview with IDP man, Rumonge Province, 28 June 2016.

our political party strong enough to contend with the ruling party which used all the government's facilities to campaign and accomplish their political agenda."<sup>164</sup> Others were disillusioned by the government's failure to deliver on its promises. One IDP woman, married to a policeman, said that the ruling party "cheated us, saying that we will give birth free of charge, our children will study free of charge, our children will be [medically] treated free of charge. But we did not know this was a strategy to enslave us, to make us chant their slogans only to discover in the end that we have been cheated and used by the ruling party for their selfish interests."<sup>165</sup> This disillusionment and frustration was tangible throughout the interviews: "[m]any of those that fled said they are fed up with life in Burundi, that poverty and hunger will finish them, that their children have no bright future. Others said that they are tired of the incessant chaos in Burundi and instability as well."<sup>166</sup>

For others, the primary frustration was the government's inability to address the crisis at an early stage. As a teacher in Bujumbura asked:

I wonder why the government didn't take notice of what was happening and find a solution to the crisis quickly. What other signs were they waiting for? Did they think that these people were going on holidays? If not, why didn't the government hurry to find solution to the crisis and today they are lamenting that the refugees should come back while they produced them?<sup>167</sup>

Most of all, people are feeling powerless. In the words of a refugee man living in Nyaragusu refugee camp: "I am powerless. If I were powerful, I would advise the current president to stop hardening his heart and stop his arrogant speeches. But I know he is not ready to relinquish power."<sup>168</sup> As a result, many of those interviewed right across the political spectrum talked of their utter disillusionment with the government. While it is important to acknowledge that the government retains strong support in many parts of Burundi, it is also important to recognise the growing disappointment as people begin to realise that the government is not delivering on many of its promises.

## Land: the heart of the matter

It is clear that people are living with terrible uncertainty; and most are also living with severe poverty. Life is excruciatingly hard for millions of people, and they are not making unreasonable demands. As a woman living in Bujumbura said, "[a]s a Burundi citizen, what I need is only peace, food and shelter. Before this crisis things were not bad and people were living peacefully without fear but after the talks around elections and the election itself we lost

---

<sup>164</sup> Interview female politician, Musaga, (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 31 May 2016.

<sup>165</sup> Interview with IDP woman, Rumonge Province, 28 June 2016.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with young woman, Makamba Province, 11 June 2016.

<sup>167</sup> Interview with woman, Ngagara, Bujumbura, 1 June 2016.

<sup>168</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 14 June 2016.

hope completely.”<sup>169</sup> Or as a man living in Rumonge Province said, “[w]hat matters most are security and peace so that if one goes to cultivate his fields, he comes back safe and sound.”<sup>170</sup>

Burundi is a poor country by any standard, and no issue is more critical to livelihoods and development than access to land.<sup>171</sup> Given that the country’s economic base is overwhelmingly agriculture and that population densities are high, there is intense competition for a resource in short supply and little in the way of consolation for those who lose out. Access to land is where many of the issues discussed above converge: access to land lies at the heart of successful reintegration of those previously displaced; yet the failure to have equitable access to land drives conflict and displacement. And while population growth has been a key factor in creating a shortage of land throughout the country along with the lack of sufficient alternative forms of livelihood, unfair systems for managing land access and ownership have created and exacerbated tensions.

Previous IRRI research with returnees in southern Burundi demonstrated that access to land and reintegration are inseparable: land is access to livelihoods; it allows for the bringing together of family structures that represents a vital coping mechanism in a context of extreme poverty; it symbolises connection with the past, with history, a re-affirmation of identity; and its equitable distribution represents hope for sustainable peace. Yet it was also in short supply even before approximately half a million Burundians began returning to the country. At the time, there was a recognition of the need to address demands on land in a way that was simultaneously equitable *and* feasible for the long-term stability of Burundi. However, interviews conducted by IRRI in 2009 showed that many people were extremely dissatisfied with the process. Some were asked to share their land in an attempt by the government to reach a compromise between returning refugees and current occupants. As a result, many found themselves sharing a small piece of land with total strangers. Others were unable to reclaim their land because it had been given to corporate or government ventures (including sugar plantations and infrastructure), and were left landless – or, in some cases, relocated to isolated and often infertile areas known as “peace villages”. IRRI’s research showed that those living in these villages felt physically, socially and politically isolated, and it is no coincidence that many of those interviewed for this research fled from Nyabigina in Makamba, which was one of these so-called “peace villages”. At the same time, much of the humanitarian assistance that they had been promised they would receive on their return to Burundi, failed to materialise, leaving many returnees utterly destitute.

Access to land, therefore, lay at the heart of the repatriation process, and, by extension, at the heart of renewed displacement. A national crisis dovetailed with multiple localised conflicts over land, leading those who were most disenfranchised to flee. As a young woman, who had recently returned from Tanzania where she fled last year, said:

---

<sup>169</sup> Interview with woman, Nyakabiga, Bujumbura, 2 June 2016.

<sup>170</sup> Interview with man, Rumonge Province, 28 June 2016.

<sup>171</sup> For a legal background on land law in Burundi, see , IRRI, Rema Ministries and the Social Science Research Council, “Two People Cannot Wear the Same Pair of Shoes’: Citizenship, Land and the Return of Refugees to Burundi,” Citizenship and Forced Migration in the Great Lakes Region Working Paper No. 2, November 2009, available at <http://www.refugee-rights.org/Publications/Papers/2009/TwoPeopleCantWeartheSamePairOfShoes.111009.pdf> accessed 30 November 2016



In this area, there is only one problem which is causing insecurity: lack of land. This problem is so severe that even if the crisis were over, there will be another crisis which will be difficult to quench, the problem of land. As you know, most of the inhabitants of Burundi depend largely on agriculture. So if one does not have [a place] to cultivate, he becomes automatically poor.<sup>172</sup>

One woman, who fled from a “peace village” told of how part of her land had been “seized” by the Land Commission, and she had been forced to share it with another returnee. She said, “I had land. When they came to perform the sharing, they brought guns to silence us. Then another returnee was given the remaining part on my side. So then I decided I could not stay in Burundi. That is why I left. It was in April 2015.”<sup>173</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, relationships in some areas between those who had returned from exile and those who had remained in Burundi were extremely tense. As one woman, who had been forced to flee in 1993, said: “[t]he atmosphere among the residents and returnees was full of confusion. Residents were not looking at returnees in a good way. The residents were saying that we had invaded their lands, and the only solution was to get rid of us. They even killed one returnee named Mathias... He was killed because of the issue of land.”<sup>174</sup> Indeed, several of those interviewed in Tanzania referred to land disputes that remained unresolved for years. One man was in the middle of a land dispute with someone from the security forces, and he was afraid they would use the unrest as an excuse to kill him.<sup>175</sup>

The extent to which land disputes reflected poor governance of that land was also recognised by those interviewed. Failures around equitable access to land were seen as part of the same trajectory as the abuses of power and mismanagement of resources that had sparked the 2015 demonstrations in Bujumbura. As one woman said, “[w]e have problems with land disputes. It is our biggest problem. But it is also the result of poor governance.... The problem we have is the authorities assign the same land to different people. This creates big problems.”<sup>176</sup>

At the same time, the ability for those who fled to return from exile was seen as a key marker of good governance. An elderly woman expressed sadness seeing her community broken up yet again: “I wish all the scattered people would come back and join their properties they left behind so that we may build our nation.”<sup>177</sup> Their return would be an indicator that the country was once more heading in the right direction –towards greater stability.

Land, therefore, remains a key issue that needs to be resolved. In the immediate term, many people in Burundi are hungry, not least with the reduction in humanitarian assistance that has further exacerbated the situation. While many are returning to Burundi from exile, they are often doing so because of the terrible push factors, not because they have sufficient resources to allow them to return. At the same time, and as demonstrated above, land is not just an

<sup>172</sup> Interview with young woman, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with woman, Makamba Province, 10 June 2016.

<sup>174</sup> Interview with refugee woman, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 15 June 2016.

<sup>175</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 16 June 2016.

<sup>176</sup> Interview with woman, widow, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>177</sup> Interview with elderly woman, Makamba Province, 11 June 2016.

economic resource: it represents social and political capital, and unless this capital is handled far more carefully and justly, inequitable access to land will continue to have the potential to drive conflict and displacement indefinitely.

## The way forward?

So what do those interviewed see as the way forward. Essentially, they can see two options: rebellion or dialogue. While there was a clear preference for a negotiated solution, it was clear that in light of all the frustrations and lack of progress noted above, some were feeling tempted to opt for a violent solution.

## The pull of rebellion

Disillusioned with politicians, and living in fear of the security forces, many stated that they want nothing to do with politics. To the extent possible, they are putting their heads down, staying off the political radar and trying to feed their families – albeit in a context of difficult odds. A few, however, said that they were being driven into the arms of rebel groups as they saw this as the only option left. The pervasive sense of disillusionment with those who claim to represent civilians, leaving people feeling utterly powerless, risks creating a ready-supply of “foot-soldiers” for those who would like to continue the instability.

Certainly, the socio-economic and political context is ripe for recruitment. With high levels of unemployment and few opportunities, levels of frustration among the youth are high. At the same time, there are many former fighters from previous wars both within Burundi and over the borders for whom demobilisation and reintegration has failed to deliver viable alternatives to fighting. One interviewee told of how he had been a child soldier during the 1990s: “[s]ince I was demobilised, no-one has come to ask about the conditions of life I lead. Many of these child soldiers have lost hope and are too sad. They have received no assistance since their demobilisation at Gitega in 2004. Those we served in the bush are now in power, while we live in misery.”<sup>178</sup>



*Road in Burundi, February 2016 © IRR/*

<sup>178</sup> Interview with man, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

Furthermore, many young people are finding life increasingly difficult. A student in Musaga said that he would enrol himself in a “fighting group” for his security if things become any worse: “[w]e hope the current negotiations and dialogue will yield tangible solutions to the current crisis. If they don’t, there is no other alternative but to fight.”<sup>179</sup>

Another young man, who used to work for government intelligence, when asked why he had joined FOREBU, a rebel group, replied:

We fight for human rights; we do not want these killings, injustice, corruption, and violence. In the past I was working with the investigation department. But I saw the evil and torture that were happening there and so I defected. Now I live in hiding... Whenever anybody hears of any plot against me, either in the police, the army or even in the investigation department, they ring me up... I was a key organiser of the riots in the city of Bujumbura.

When asked if the riots achieved what they had hoped, he said that they had only made the situation worse. The opposition, he said, has splintered.<sup>180</sup> As another man said, “my question is this: where does the government think the youth go? Does it think that these youths will stay and remain where they fled and run forever?”<sup>181</sup>

In the countryside, there are ongoing rumours about rebel groups forming and possible war: “In this area we have not seen rebel groups but we hear that they do their trainings in Tanzania.”<sup>182</sup> Others said they had participated in rebellion before and knew how bad it was, so would never join one again. Regardless, it is clear that the fear that the situation could escalate into civil war is not without foundation.

## Dialogue?

Given the levels of disillusionment, when asked about the different dialogue initiatives – both the internal Burundi dialogue, and the external one led by the East African Community – there were two reactions: first, people saw dialogue as the best hope for ending the crisis (not least as the alternative was seen to be civil war); but second, people were cynical about the mechanisms that are currently in place.

Most of those interviewed saw no hope for the internal dialogue – known as CNDI – and did not hold back in their criticism. Even a member of the ruling party saw nothing to recommend the process: “[t]hese talks are just a comedy played by the ruling party to cheat the international community that there is something going on to settle the issues that led Burundians to the streets but in reality, they are not. The government is just buying time until they finish the third term, which has been the igniting factor to the current crisis.”<sup>183</sup> Another saw the process as “just a waste of time

<sup>179</sup> Interview with young man, Musaga, (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 30 May 2016.

<sup>180</sup> Interview with young opposition politician, homeless, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

<sup>181</sup> Interview with man living in Kanyosha, Bujumbura, 31 May 2016.

<sup>182</sup> Interview with politician, Rutana Province, 7 June 2016.

<sup>183</sup> Interview with young man, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

and resources, a way of blinding the international community.”<sup>184</sup> Those who participate in these internal dialogue processes were talked of as “puppets and robots who just say what they heard like parrots from the master minders.”<sup>185</sup> Instead, it has reinforced “a culture of lies [within Burundi]. It is a lifestyle characterised by lies and the refusal to tell the truth.”<sup>186</sup>

By contrast, people, particularly those that sympathise with the opposition, put more hope in the external dialogue process in Arusha – not least given that at the time the interviews were conducted, a round of negotiations were about to take place. As one young student said, “[w]e hope that [the dialogue] from Arusha will yield more tangible results than the current internal so-called dialogue.”<sup>187</sup> The two aspects that made the external dialogue more hopeful for people was the fact that there would be an external mediator; and the fact that being held outside of the country would allow it to be more inclusive for the opposition.

The international community, which was otherwise seen to have been relatively unhelpful was seen to have a key role to play in pushing forward these negotiations. Their role in mediating a solution to the crisis was mentioned in numerous interviews –albeit alongside suspicion of external agendas in some cases. A member of one of the opposition parties said that the “international community should stress dialogue and convince the current president to give up his third term.” However, as he also went on to say, “the solution of the Burundian crisis should come first from Burundians themselves.”<sup>188</sup> This perspective was echoed by a number of people: outside accountability is helpful, but external interference can often be misguided.

Therefore, many were also cynical about the external process – and this was even before the dismal outcome of the July talks. There were a number of reasons for this pessimism. First, people were concerned about inclusiveness, as they were unsure about the criteria for participation: “I don’t see anything good that will come out of those consultations because people who have been invited are not the real stakeholders. They should invite all those who took arms to fight the government, the politicians who fled the country, civil society organisations, and the international community.”<sup>189</sup> Another woman said that without the Red Tabara or FOREBU rebel groups being invited nothing would come of the process: “How can we expect any value to those talks in Arusha if key figures have been left out?”<sup>190</sup>

Second, people were frustrated at the lack of clarity over the content of the negotiations. As one man said: “Even if we were at this negotiation table, things are not clear as to the agenda. Will the Arusha negotiations be able to force the government out?”<sup>191</sup> People had clear ideas of what they *did* want to see discussed – in particular issues of

<sup>184</sup> Interview with man, Rumonge Province, 28 June 2016.

<sup>185</sup> Interview with elderly woman, Nyabigina Commune, Makamba Province, 11 June 2016.

<sup>186</sup> Interview with man living in Musaga, (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 31 May 2016.

<sup>187</sup> Interview with young man living in Musaga, (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 30 May 2016.

<sup>188</sup> Interview with young politician, homeless, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

<sup>189</sup> Interview with woman, Nyakabiga, Bujumbura, 2 June 2016.

<sup>190</sup> Interview with female politician, living in Musaga, (on the outskirts of Bujumbura), 31 May 2016.

<sup>191</sup> Interview with young politician, homeless, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

governance in Burundi, “including respect of human rights, impartiality, corruption, security and peace.”<sup>192</sup> Some were concerned that the main emphasis would be on finding some kind of power-sharing agreement that would fail to address underlying issues. As one man said, “I do not object to these negotiations. We can even support them. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that this is a political game that benefits only politicians.”<sup>193</sup>

Third, even if there is an agreement, people do not believe that it will be implemented. A man who identified himself a member of the CNDD-FDD said, with reference to criticism of the Arusha Agreement that the government “pretends to accept these agreements, but they are not happy with them.”<sup>194</sup>

**“The international community should only pay for air tickets, hotel rooms and food! If it does this, it would accelerate the negotiations...”**

And fourth, people were concerned that it was just another way of politicians making money, hanging around in luxury hotels and collecting per diems as the situation on the ground does not improve. One man had this advice for the international community: “The international community should only pay for air tickets, hotel rooms and food! If it does this, it would accelerate the negotiations because delegates would realise that there is no money to put into their pockets.”<sup>195</sup> Another man said that he had heard that negotiators would not get a per diem as they had at the previous Arusha talks: “I am delighted ... because this may cause them to settle the problem quickly.”<sup>196</sup>

Ultimately, therefore, people recognised the need for power and resources to be shared in an equitable way; and yet do not know how this will happen. One woman, when asked what she thought could be done about the future of the country, replied:

Suppose your first born whether son or daughter roasts a sweet potato and ate it alone, while four other children are watching and she or he does not want to share with them, even a small bit of it. What would then happen, is he or she would be the only one entitled to live? But was he or she born alone? Are not the rest part of the family? How come he or she decides to eat the cake alone? I hope you’ve got the answer to your question.<sup>197</sup>

Or, as another interviewee asked, “Is it so hard to share power?”<sup>198</sup>

<sup>192</sup> Interview with politician, Bujumbura, 5 June 2016.

<sup>193</sup> Interview with man, Rutana Province, 6 June 2016.

<sup>194</sup> Interview with elderly man, Gasenyi neighbourhood, Bujumbura, 31 May 2016.

<sup>195</sup> Interview with man, Kanyosha, Bujumbura, 31 May 2016.

<sup>196</sup> Interview with man, Kanyosha, Bujumbura, 31 May 2016.

<sup>197</sup> Interview with IDP woman, Rumonge Province, 28 June 2016.

<sup>198</sup> Interview with refugee man, Nyaragusu refugee camp, 13 June 2016.

Others, albeit a minority of those interviewed, did not think anything good would come of either of either dialogue, and instead saw violence as the only option. Asked about the current Arusha negotiations or dialogue, one young man who had joined one of the rebel groups said, “We are not concerned by the current negotiations taking place in Arusha for we don’t expect anything from those negotiations. It is just a waste of time and a waste of tickets. We are convinced that the current government only hears the language of weapons.”<sup>199</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite these minority positions, it is overwhelmingly clear that Burundians do not want violence. They are sick of it. They are also fed up with the way all of those who claim to represent them politically – whether currently in the government or in opposition – have failed to do so. And it is undeniable that they deserve far better.

While it is important not to overlook what *has* been achieved in the country, especially prior to the escalation of the current political crisis – including tackling the issue of identity-based politics head-on – Burundi still has a long way to go and this crisis has set progress back significantly. Two interlinked factors have conspired against the realities of a genuine peace dividend: growing political oppression and poor economic policies. Combined, they have created a situation in which political power remains the primary means by which to access resources. And resources are seen to be the primary concern of those who hold, or aspire to hold, political office. And the most precious resource is land. People have been told to share land; yet the government refuses to share power. The irony of that is not missed by the people of Burundi.

To date, the political crisis has not escalated into civil war. The refusal by many civilians to be drawn into conflict, along with an army that has so far retained a degree of diversity (albeit one that is increasingly precarious), can largely be thanked for this. Yet the situation remains extremely tense, and there are a number of key points of danger. First, the country’s youth, who are the most numerous demographic in the country, are often the ones who have felt the brunt of political mismanagement most acutely, whether through unemployment, a general sense of disempowerment, or now being the target of political violence. Second, the political system needs to be reformed so that state capture, whereby access to power and access to resources remain intertwined, does not dominate the national political logic. Urgent action needs to be taken to ensure that the elections in 2020 become an opportunity to break with this failure and symbolise reform, rather than further entrenching failures. All efforts need to be made to move towards the latter.

To find a way forward, therefore, a number of things must happen. Repression and killings must stop. This will allow for more political space to be opened up and will facilitate more effective dialogue. For a longer term solution, however, a top-level political solution is vital. In order for this to happen, politicians will have to put aside personal ambitions and focus on the good of the country. Dialogue also has to be promoted – but it needs to be both inclusive and unequivocally clear in what it is trying to achieve. Another crucial pillar – and far more overlooked – is a

---

<sup>199</sup> Interview with politician, Bujumbura, 30 May 2016.

comprehensive reconstruction plan able to capacitate authorities to fairly address disputes at the local level, facilitate the return of those in exile, and offer peace dividends. Ongoing programmes that work towards conflict mitigation, and that address key challenges such as access to land and diversification in the economy, desperately need to take place alongside any national process. Peace *can* continue to be built from the grassroots upwards, and regional and international actors need to do all that they can to support these. Ultimately, stability in Burundi is going to be built through multiple grassroots initiatives that bring individuals, families and communities together. If the international community waits for the few at the top to sort out their differences without offering sufficient support to these grassroots initiatives, it is likely, at best to extend the crisis, at worst escalate it.