REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

FIELD REPORT

A POWERFUL VOICE FOR LIFESAVING ACTION

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NO RESPITE: BURUNDIAN REFUGEES IN THE DR CONGO

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Front cover: Mother and son who recently fled Burundi by crossing Lake Tanganyika in a dugout canoe. They are now living with a host community in Fizi territory, South Kivu. This page: A Burundian family living in a town in the Ruzizi Plain. Many Burundians told RI that though living outside Lusenda was difficult, they still believed it gave their children a better life.

INTRODUCTION

Since April 2015, a violent political crisis in Burundi has forced several hundred thousand people from their homes, many seeking refuge in neighboring countries. Nearly 23,000 Burundians fled overland or by lake into the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This number may seem small relative to other refugee crises around the world, but the Burundians have arrived into a region that is wracked by severe insecurity and volatility. Burundian refugees face threats from the myriad armed groups that operate in eastern DRC, in addition to Congolese security forces and migration officials who prey on vulnerable populations. A robust international response is required to protect and support Burundian refugees in the DRC, something that is lacking at present.

RECOMMENDATIONS

DONOR COUNTRIES SHOULD:

- ❒ Increase funding for the protection monitoring and response activities of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in refugee-hosting territories of South Kivu;
- ❒ Through UNHCR, provide greater resources to the Congolese National Commission for Refugees (CNR), including support for the CNR's training and monitoring activities vis-a-vis other government agencies;
- ❒ Increase funding for the training of Congolese security forces in refugee rights and refugee law, and support the creation of a police de proximité system in refugee-hosting areas;
- ❒ Solicit and support projects that enhance local communities' capacity to host Burundian refugees, including improvements in local infrastructure, social services, and environmental management;

UNHCR MUST:

- ❒ Deploy additional protection staff to the refugee-hosting territories of South Kivu, and provide additional support to partners working in both protection monitoring and response;
- ❒ Consistently enforce a maximum one-week stay in transit centers for newly-arrived refugees;
- ❒ Establish and implement a complaints and feedback mechanism for Burundian refugees that is in accordance with the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability;

- ❒ UNHCR and CNR must increase the frequency of their inspection visits of offices of the Directorate-General for Migration in South Kivu to mitigate violations of refugee rights and international refugee law; further, a clear mechanism for provincial and national-level follow-up must be established in coordination with the Ministries of Interior and Humanitarian Affairs.

BACKGROUND

Following the controversial decision by Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza to run for a third term in 2015, as well as a failed coup d'état against him, Burundi has fallen into a cycle of violence and impunity. At present, the Burundian security forces, alongside a youth militia allied with the ruling party, persecute citizens who are perceived as not actively supporting the government. Arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances, and targeted killings occur both in the capital, Bujumbura, and in outlying provinces.

This unrelenting persecution has forced at least 260,000 Burundians to flee to neighboring states since March 2015, including Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, as Refugees International (RI) and the U.S. State Department have reported,[1] Burundian security forces and militia are actively blocking would-be refugees from leaving the country. As a result, many civilians remain displaced internally. At the time of writing, the International Organization for Migration had identified more than 25,000 Burundian internally displaced persons (IDPs) across three provinces,[2] and RI believes that many more are too scared even to identify themselves.[3]

Those Burundians who make it to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) typically travel overland into Uvira territory, or across Lake Tanganyika into Fizi territory. Nearly 23,000 Burundians have been registered as refugees in the DRC. The refugees began to arrive in March 2015, and initially settled in host communities throughout South Kivu and Katanga provinces. The Lusenda refugee site was established in July 2015, with over 16,000 Burundian refugees living there now, and at least an additional 6,000 living in communities throughout South Kivu's Uvira and Fizi territories. Though Lusenda has all of the appearances of a traditional refugee camp, it is officially referred to as a "site" because the Congolese government is not pursuing a strict policy of encampment.

Refugees who choose to live at Lusenda are the only ones with access to regular assistance. Out-of-site refugees are supported within the United Nations cluster system (coordinated by the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) based on need rather than status. Nonetheless, as predicated by its mandate, refugee protection throughout the region remains the responsibility of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

Though the number of Burundian refugees in the DRC is small by comparison to other refugee crises, the context into which they have arrived is highly volatile and requires a robust humanitarian protection response. Like much of the DRC, Uvira and Fizi territories are profoundly ill-suited to host refugees. State control and capacity in these territories are limited, with local security forces often a source of insecurity for the population. Social services are barely functional-to-nonexistent, and standards of living are extremely low. Further, more than 50,000 Congolese in these two territories are internally displaced, with more than 360,000 IDPs in South Kivu province as a whole.[4]

At least 20 different non-state armed groups are active in South Kivu, according to an analysis by the Congo Research Group.[5] Of these, the vast majority are Congolese armed groups – ranging from ethnic militias and village self-defense forces to de facto criminal gangs. But foreign armed groups have also used the region as a base of operations, among them the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and factions of the Burundian National Forces of Liberation (FNL).

In March and April 2016, an RI team visited eastern DRC to assess the situation of Burundian refugees. The team visited with refugees, aid workers, UN staff, and government officials in the Lusenda refugee site, transit centers, villages, and urban areas. RI's view is that the protection response by donors and humanitarians to the refugee influx has been lackluster, leaving refugees vulnerable to abuse. This is largely, though not entirely, attributable to severe funding shortfalls: nearly halfway through 2016, the UNHCR appeal for Burundian refugees in the DRC is just 12 percent funded, with the UN's overall Humanitarian Response Plan for the DRC at just 13 percent funded. It is imperative that the protection presence

and activities for Burundian refugees be improved, both to address current problems and stave off potential threats.

CONFRONTING THREATS TO REFUGEE PROTECTION

Upon Arrival

As noted above, fleeing Burundi can be a life-threatening and traumatic experience. Yet after surviving this ordeal, newly-arrived refugees in the DRC are received by local authorities in a manner that can be both confusing and degrading.

RI asked various Congolese and UN officials in South Kivu to explain how Burundian refugees are supposed to identify themselves and register upon arrival in the DRC. Their responses varied substantially, perhaps reflecting a lack of clear guidance on the matter. However, as best RI can determine, this process usually begins at the Directorate-General for Migration (DGM), a branch of the Congolese Ministry of Interior charged with regulating both immigration and the movements of foreigners within the DRC. The DGM is intended to be a refugee's first point of contact with the government upon arrival in DRC, with the DGM referring refugees to a separate branch of the Ministry of Interior, the Congolese National Commission for Refugees (CNR). The CNR is then meant to conduct a protection screening and, if the refugees wish to be encamped, to convey them to one of four transit centers and then onward to Lusenda.

> ***"There is not much assistance here. We are not taken care of."***
>
> -Recently arrived refugee at a transit center in South Kivu

Burundians who enter the DRC via formal border points may encounter DGM officers posted there, whereas the many refugees who cross informally are required to seek out government agents in a nearby town. It is worth noting that some areas where refugees enter the country – in particular the Ubwari Peninsula – have no formal Congolese government presence, meaning refugees may have to walk for multiple days to reach the nearest outpost.

RI's direct observations and interviews with humanitarians suggest that many DGM officers are either deficient in their understanding of refugee law or outright exploitative in their approach to refugees. One morning in Baraka, Fizi territory, RI advocates encountered a group of recently-arrived Burundian refugees waiting outside a DGM post. The refugees had been told that they needed a written pass from DGM before they could access a refugee transit center, and ultimately, be transported to Lusenda. Of the roughly 20 refugees in the group, at least eight were children, including some who were physically overcome by hunger and exhaustion. The refugees told RI that they had waited for a DGM officer to arrive since the previous day, and had slept outside the office that night. About an hour later, RI saw these same refugees sitting by the roadside. They told RI that a DGM officer had refused to give them a pass because "he was busy," and had told them to "go back to Burundi."

Burundian refugees in Fizi territory also complained directly to RI about abuse by DGM agents, saying that their money and valuables were confiscated when they presented themselves at DGM offices. One refugee told RI, "The people at the DGM office don't even ask for money: they just go through your pockets and take your cash or your phone." Another said, "If you have a suitcase with you, they'll look through it. And if you have something good, they take it." A UN official who spoke to RI acknowledged that they faced "longstanding problems with the DGM" involving a number of "very serious incidents." The official added, "We do have problems now, but it was much, much worse before."

To be sure, the poor performance and predatory behavior of DGM agents is rooted in the much larger problem of failed civil service reform in the DRC. Fixing this problem, while necessary, is well beyond the scope of humanitarian action. But humanitarians must do more to support refugees during their interactions with the state, and to advocate on their behalf. And the capacity of both UNHCR and CNR to protect Burundian refugees in this way is insufficient. When RI encountered the refugees who were languishing on the steps of the DGM office in Baraka, for example, the nearest UNHCR and CNR personnel were working at the Lusenda site or at their offices about an hour's drive north.

Certainly, UNHCR and CNR cannot be everywhere when new refugees arrive. However, more must be done to mitigate egregious behavior by local authorities. To this end, UNHCR and CNR should conduct more regular inspection visits to DGM offices throughout refugee arrival areas in South Kivu to assess the treatment and processing of refugees by DGM officials. The results of these visits should then be discussed jointly with the provincial Ministries of Interior and Humanitarian Affairs, and any subsequent action points shared with UNHCR and its Congolese counterparts in Kinshasa.

The CNR, which is largely funded by UNHCR, is meant to be UNHCR's primary partner and interlocutor within the Congolese government. If CNR is weak and understaffed, then the impact is felt throughout all of UNHCR's efforts and activities. Some humanitarians told RI that CNR could make

better use of the resources it has, which may be the case. Yet RI's view is that CNR still needs greater support to match the scale of the needs, specifically along two main tracks. First, CNR must have more robust staffing and equipment to support its daily activities, including registration, camp management, and protection. (For more on this issue, see the section "Beyond Lusenda.") Second, CNR's capacity to train and advocate to other Congolese government agencies (such as DGM) must be enhanced. This might be approached through a train-the-trainer model, whereby UNHCR sponsors and trains a South Kivu refugee rights focal point within the CNR. This individual could then be dispatched to different parts of the province and different government agencies, both to train and to monitor compliance with refugee rights and refugee law.

In Transit

Even once refugees reach a transit center, their challenges continue. RI visited the two main transit centers where new refugee arrivals are processed and biometrically registered before taking up residence at Lusenda. There, RI spoke with numerous refugees who said they had spent weeks at the centers with no clear indication about when they might be able to move to Lusenda. One aid worker at one transit center told RI that some refugees had been there for two months. As the centers are meant for only short-term stays (two to five days) only the most basic services – food, water, and shelter – are available, and a prolonged or indefinite stay can only add to the anguish that people experienced during their flight from home. Refugees sleep in large communal tents with no privacy for individual families. One Burundian woman told RI that she fled to the DRC with her three children after her husband was abducted from their home. She had been in the transit center for two weeks and said that she had no information about when she and her children would be registered and moved to Lusenda. At the time, RI was told that UNHCR was waiting for a certain number of refugees to reach the transit centers, at which point it would dispatch teams to register and transport them to Lusenda.

> ***"We don't know when we will be going to Lusenda. I've been here a month and I still don't have any idea."***
>
> -Burundian refugee, Sange transit site

A month after this visit, RI was informed that registrations and onward movements from transit centers were happening more frequently. This is a welcome change, and every effort must be made to ensure refugees continue moving through transit centers in a timely manner. One way of doing this

Children at a refugee transit site in South Kivu. Refugees are supposed to spend no more than five days here before transferring to the main refugee site in Lusenda, but RI spoke to several who had been there for weeks.

is for UNHCR to change its approach to registration, since conducting regular biometric registration in the transit sites can be time- and resource-intensive. Instead, UNHCR should consider moving refugees to the Lusenda site after a less demanding, household-level registration, and then conduct full biometric registration at Lusenda. In any case, when registration and transportation is delayed for any reason, UNHCR must clearly communicate this to refugees at the transit centers.

Within the Lusenda Refugee Site

The Lusenda site stretches across a series of hills near the shore of Lake Tanganyika, and is now close to full at 16,900 residents. One of the most pressing protection challenges at Lusenda is the poor relationship between residents and the Congolese National Police (PNC). PNC officers are posted around the perimeter of the site and can enter if security conditions so require. At the time of RI's visit – and for months prior, according to local and international officials who spoke to RI – trust between the PNC and refugees in the site was extremely low. Indeed, when asked about living conditions in the site, nearly every refugee whom RI met at Lusenda cited the police as a main concern.

Much of the tension between refugees and police appears to stem from the PNC's response to refugee protests about camp conditions – including delays in the delivery of food and the insufficiency of the ration size. As one humanitarian explained the problem to RI, "Some parts of Lusenda are inhabited by

refugees who have been displaced before and know their rights as refugees. So they have protested, and their complaints have a basis in fact." In at least one case, PNC officers who were dispatched to control the protests resorted to firing live bullets as a crowd-control measure. Though no refugees were reported injured or killed by police, Lusenda residents who spoke to RI repeatedly expressed anger about this matter.

Numerous refugees in Lusenda told RI they did not feel that their complaints to UNHCR and CNR about police behavior were taken seriously, and that they feared complaining to the police forces directly lest they face backlash. One refugee said, "A CNR agent who did try to plead on behalf of the refugees was rebuffed by the police, so what chance will we have?" The end result has been that refugees do not see the PNC as an ally in establishing site security. Indeed, RI was told that in one case refugees went so far as to block PNC officers from entering a section of the Lusenda site for multiple days.

Addressing security sector reform in the DRC is (like civil service reform) a long-term project that is fraught with challenges. Despite repeated efforts to strengthen the PNC, many officers nationwide are still poorly equipped, insufficiently trained, and infrequently paid. This is certainly true of officers serving at the Lusenda site, where living conditions for police officers are poor, with no permanent shelters to house them. As one UN official working nearby told RI, "The police here have a lot of the same needs as the refugees. They even lack food to eat. So you can imagine how they will behave." But even against this depressing backdrop, humanitarians must do what they can to improve relations between refugees and the PNC. That relationship will be critical both to stemming ongoing protection violations, as well as limiting the influence of non-state armed groups around the Lusenda site. (See "Beyond Lusenda.")

Some changes currently underway may help address these problems. First, UNHCR has recently opened an office a short distance from Lusenda, which will allow staff to have greater access to refugees and vice versa. Second, in mid-May, RI was told that boxes to receive refugees' written feedback/complaints would soon be installed in Lusenda. This should be done as quickly as possible and implemented in accordance with Commitments Four and Five of the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability.[6] Third, RI was told that UNHCR and MONUSCO are in the process of enhancing the living conditions of the police at Lusenda, as well as providing them with non-lethal equipment that can be used for crowd control. Still, for these changes to have an effect on refugees' actual and perceived security, they must be supplemented with more direct attention to police performance.

> ***"The police take us to their post, where we can be beaten. We tell the CNR about this, but they do nothing."***
>
> -Burundian refugee, Lusenda site

First, there is a need for more intensive and consistent training of Congolese security personnel in refugee law and refugee rights. This is necessary both for police around the Lusenda site, as well as PNC and FARDC forces serving in other refugee-hosting areas. Some humanitarians and UN officials told RI that Congolese security forces view refugees primarily as a threat, and are therefore quick to act aggressively toward them. Training officers about refugees' rights – to receive protection, to move freely, and to be treated in accordance with due process – may help alter their perceptions and behavior. UN officials and the CNR told RI that they do conduct training for PNC and FARDC officers on refugee rights and law, but

The Lusenda refugee site in South Kivu, which is home to almost 17,000 Burundian refugees and growing, is nearly at full capacity.

Thousands of refugee children live at the Lusenda site in Fizi territory, South Kivu.

they acknowledged this training does not keep pace with the officers' rotation schedule, leaving some untrained at any given time. Greater effort and resources must therefore be dedicated to such training, preferably by building up the training capacity of CNR.

Second, it is worth exploring ways to enhance communication between refugees and security forces. Currently, the various security actors stationed around Lusenda – the PNC, FARDC, and MONUSCO – do convene meetings with one another, and with humanitarian actors. But refugees expressed dissatisfaction with this arrangement to RI, insisting that their concerns are still not being addressed. One refugee told RI, "We complain about the police to the CNR, but they do not respond or follow-up. We have never had a meeting with the police to discuss these issues."

> ***"We don't feel heard."***
>
> -Burundian refugee, Lusenda site

In recent years, MONUSCO and donors have supported several projects in the DRC to encourage the PNC to adopt a *police de proximité* approach. In essence, this model encourages police officers to view their communities as partners in security. Alongside training for PNC officers, this approach involves the use of Local Security Councils in which police, elected leaders, and civil society determine a shared understanding of crime and how to address it. A similar approach – involving refugees, civil society representatives, UNHCR, and CNR alongside the PNC – could be helpful in Lusenda and refugee-hosting communities, particularly if individual refugees (rather than simply leaders) have the opportunity to be heard. Improving PNC and FARDC behavior toward refugees will be an uphill endeavor, but that should not preclude efforts in that direction.

BEYOND LUSENDA

Providing protection to refugees within a camp or site may be challenging, but providing it beyond such sites – where refugees usually prefer to live – is often even more difficult. Such is the case in eastern DRC, where at least 6,000 Burundian refugees live outside the Lusenda site, and where even Lusenda residents often leave the site for work or to access social services. The threats facing these refugees are not being met with the necessary protection or support from donors or humanitarians.

Burundian Armed Groups

As RI and others have previously reported,[7] Burundian armed groups have posed threats to Burundian refugee populations for decades. During Burundi's previous civil conflicts, rebel forces have drawn support from refugee sites in neighboring countries. Many of those same rebel forces (or their successors), are active players in today's brewing conflict – on both the government and opposition sides. And as has been reported by RI and others, these same forces are continuing to manipulate and exploit Burundian refugees.[8]

Burundian rebel forces have been present in Uvira and Fizi territories for years, and the opportunities for new Burundian combatants to cross over into the DRC are plentiful. Border monitoring and immigration enforcement on the Congolese side remain weak. In the words of one UN official in the region, "Almost anyone can cross over [to the DRC], do whatever they want, and go back home without being bothered." This applies equally to both travel overland and across Lake Tanganyika.

Both routes are currently used not only by Burundian refugees, but also by arms traffickers and combatants.[8]

RI has learned of credible allegations that isolated incidents of recruitment have taken place among Burundian refugees in the DRC. Moreover, elements of the Congolese security forces and government believe that refugees are interacting with armed groups and are already acting on that belief. RI was told that Congolese officials had raised such concerns with humanitarians and MONUSCO, as well as with the press. And according to incident reports shared with RI, refugees have also been arrested on suspicion of carrying out "subversive activities" and returned to Burundi by Congolese authorities – all without consulting UNHCR, and quite possibly in violation of the UN Refugee Convention. Therefore, humanitarians have to treat this seriously: not only to address the threat as it is, but also to see that it is handled in line with refugee law. Ensuring the humanitarian and civilian character of asylum is vital in any refugee response. And it is especially critical in this case, given the volatility of the refugee-hosting country and the experiences of Burundian refugees past and present.

Local Community Tensions

The protection threats to Burundian refugees outside Lusenda do not come solely from Burundian armed groups. Tensions between refugees and their hosts (to include their armed proxies) are also a cause for concern. Especially in the Ruzizi Plain, armed groups are used as protection by villages or customary leaders, and are frequently deployed in conflicts over access to land and other resources. This means that even small, localized incidents can have large-scale, violent repercussions.

> ***"If the international community doesn't take care of the refugees, and they try to take land or settle wherever they want, this could be explosive."***
>
> -Local government official, Ruzizi Plain

Some signs of strain between Burundian refugees and their hosts are beginning to show. For example, some refugees told RI that locals had begun forcing them to pay to access water points. Civil society leaders and humanitarians also told RI that local communities were "very concerned" about the collection of firewood by Burundian refugees, or by aid agencies on their behalf. These communities, they explained, did not want to see a repeat of the widespread deforestation that occurred during the influx of Rwandan refugees in the 1990s.

These tensions may well rise as more refugees arrive, and could be further inflamed by the presence and activities of Burundian armed opposition in the region. One senior humanitarian told RI, "These communities are not happy about the refugee arrivals, even if they are not prepared to kick them out yet." He added, "Some are nervous about accepting Burundian refugees because they remember how the arrival of the Rwandan refugees led to the presence of the FDLR, including attacks on the very people who hosted the refugees."

Anticipating possible incidents between refugees and their host communities, the international community must take a proactive approach, by closely monitoring developments, identifying trends, and being responsive to the concerns of both refugees and their hosts. MONUSCO has taken some steps in this regard, including setting up community alert networks in refugee-hosting areas. But the humanitarian community's response thus far has not put local communities at ease, as neither the CNR nor UNHCR appear to interact sufficiently with both communities.

Congolese Security Forces

In such a volatile environment, state security agencies naturally must play a role in protecting refugee sites, as well as ensuring the personal safety of refugees and their hosts. Yet the PNC, the FARDC, and the DGM are often seen as threats to refugee protection rather than sources of support. According to RI's interviews with UN officials and humanitarians, both local Congolese and Burundian refugees are subjected to ill treatment by both PNC and FARDC officers, but refugees are more vulnerable to it because of their status as foreigners.

One of the primary flashpoints between Burundian refugees and security forces is the issue of freedom of movement. Refugees are subjected to undue restrictions on their freedom of movement, as well as arbitrary arrest or extortion. UN officials told RI that refugees living in Lusenda are allowed to travel up to 20 kilometers beyond the campsite without a permit, and further afield with express permission from CNR; those living outside Lusenda apparently face no such official movement restrictions. Many refugees told RI they tried to take advantage of these policies to seek employment or trade goods. Yet particularly in Fizi territory, they said that security forces often did not respect these rules.

One refugee living in Lusenda told RI, "The police stop me from going to the market and tell us we cannot even leave the camp. We complain to the CNR about this, but they don't do anything." She added, "I've been a refugee four times before, and I know this isn't how it's supposed to be." Refugees living in villages in Fizi territory recounted similar problems, which had curtailed their ability to provide for their families. "There's no freedom of movement here. The PNC or FARDC are always

arresting us because we are refugees. Even children can be arrested. Most of the time, they just arrest refugees to extract money from them," one refugee explained to RI.

Multiple humanitarians and human rights officials told RI they agreed that police failed to understand or respect refugees' right to move freely. "If a refugee goes more than 20 kilometers from the camp [without permission], they are supposed to be returned," one UN official explained. "But the PNC and FARDC interpretation of this has been to arrest refugees and detain them at military intelligence – even though what the refugee has done is not a criminal offense...It's total cacophony!"

> ***"The main reason Burundian refugees leave our village for Lusenda is abuse by the PNC and FARDC, and the difficulty it creates for their livelihoods."***
>
> -Village chief, Fizi territory

As in Lusenda, this mistreatment has the effect of eroding refugees' trust in the security forces, and reducing the likelihood that they will report incidents of protection violations against them. For example, when asked what she would do if a security problem arose, one refugee in Fizi told RI, "We don't go to the FARDC or the PNC if there is a problem. We only go to our neighbors for help." In an environment so fraught with protection and security challenges, this should be cause for concern.

Towards an Enhanced Protection Response

The protection threats facing Burundian refugees beyond Lusenda are myriad, and the capacity of the Congolese authorities to respond effectively is extremely limited. This means the international community will have to play a larger role: bolstering the Congolese authorities where possible, holding them accountable when necessary, and intervening directly to support refugees where they live.

Just as in the Lusenda site, it is vital that PNC and FARDC in refugee-hosting communities (and at border points) receive more consistent training, and that they expand their consultations with refugees and humanitarians regarding security challenges. Equally essential (and something that can serve to chip away at impunity for security sector actors) is that UNHCR, CNR, and other protection actors expand their presence beyond Lusenda to both monitor protection issues and intervene when violations occur.

At the time of RI's visit, UNHCR's presence beyond Lusenda was limited and shrinking. The agency's overall staffing resources in South Kivu were declining, due to reductions in funding.

Burundian refugees living with a host community in the Ruzizi Plain in South Kivu. These two women are struggling to afford school fees for their children.

UNHCR was also in the process of consolidating its offices in Uvira and Fizi territories, shifting nearly all remaining staff to a bureau near the Lusenda site. While this will certainly improve UNHCR's coverage of Lusenda, it will make direct monitoring and responses to out-of-site refugees even more difficult. The CNR is also reducing its presence and activities because of insufficient funding, having recently shuttered its bureaus in both Baraka and Uvira towns. "It's not that we don't want to help the refugees – it's a question of means," one Congolese government official told RI, adding "We may not have a big presence in areas outside Lusenda, but it is even worse for UNHCR because they do not have the connections to local authorities that we do."

When the Burundian refugees first arrived in April 2015, UNHCR had engaged an NGO partner to monitor protection for both refugees and IDPs in South Kivu province. Unfortunately, UNHCR had to sever ties with the NGO in December 2015, and was unable to engage a new partner for three months. As of April 2016, UNHCR had engaged a new protection monitoring partner, with a budget for 30 monitors in the whole of Uvira and Fizi territories. Humanitarians who spoke to RI said this number would be "insufficient" to cover both Lusenda and the out-of-site population, in addition to the 50,000 IDPs living in the area.

As noted earlier, UNHCR has retained its mandate for protection throughout the Burundian refugee response, both inside and outside Lusenda. Yet providing protection goes well beyond monitoring. And during RI's visit, UNHCR did not appear able to respond to protection threats as they were received, such as through case management, child protection, or gender-based violence interventions. In mid-May, RI was told that UNHCR was preparing to deploy temporary staff to fill some of these gaps, but donors should make sure they are filled on a permanent basis.

Finally, protection monitoring and responses should be bolstered by projects that build a protective environment for Burundian refugees beyond Lusenda. Specifically, donors should fund projects that enhance local communities' own capacity to host Burundian refugees – such as the renovation of health centers, the expansion of schools, the improvement of water and sanitation facilities, and the sustainable management of forestry resources. UNHCR has already undertaken some such initiatives within host communities near Lusenda, but neither it nor its partners have the resources to do so in other refugee-hosting areas, including the Ruzizi Plain. These projects could improve humanitarian conditions, and combat the idea that refugees are a burden – or even worse, a threat – for local communities.

CONCLUSION

The Burundian refugees in the DRC may be small in number, yet they sit at the middle of a growing regional maelstrom. Burundi's political crisis continues to smolder, with the threat of mass violence looming. Meanwhile, the DRC is inching toward a calamity of its own. Elections to replace President Joseph Kabila are almost certain to be delayed, space for peaceful political debate is shrinking, and armed groups appear to be readying themselves for renewed conflict. Therefore, it is likely that the Burundian refugees in the DRC will remain there for the foreseeable future, even as their life in exile grows more difficult and dangerous. The humanitarian community must be ready to accompany and support them during these difficult days.

Michael Boyce and Mark Yarnell traveled to the eastern DRC in March and April 2016 to assess the situation of Burundian refugees.

ENDNOTES

1. Boyce, Michael and Francisca Vigaud-Walsh, "'You Are Either With Us or Against Us:' Persecution and Displacement in Burundi," Refugees International, November 18, 2015. http://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2015/11/17/burundi; U.S. Department of State, "2015 Human Rights Reports: Burundi," April 13, 2016, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2015/af/252657.htm.
2. "Displacement Tracking Matrix Report #3 – March 2016 – Burundi," International Organization for Migration, March 31, 2016, http://reliefweb.int/report/burundi/burundi-displacement-tracking-matrix-dtm-report-3-march-2016.
3. Refugees International. Ibid.
4. "RD Congo - Sud-Kivu: Personnes déplacées internes et retournées," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, March 3, 2016, https://vanuatu.humanitarianresponse.info/fr/system/files/documents/files/rdc_factsheet_mouvement_de_population_du_premier_trimestre_2016_0.pdf.
5. "Armed Groups in North and South Kivu," Congo Research Group, October 2015, http://congoresearchgroup.org/mapping-of-armed-groups-in-eastern-congo-october-2015/.
6. Commitment Four states that, "Communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements, have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them," while Commitment Five states that, "Communities and people affected by crisis have access to safe and responsive mechanisms to handle complaints." For more information, see: CHS Alliance et al., "CHS Guidance Notes and Indicators," 2015, http://www.corehumanitarianstandard.org/news/better-humanitarian-assistance-to-be-delivered-by-improved-quality-and-accountability.
7. See, for example: Boyce, Michael and Francisca Vigaud-Walsh, "Asylum Betrayed: Recruitment of Burundian Refugees in Rwanda." Refugees International, December 14, 2015, http://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2015/12/14/rwanda; International Crisis Group. "Burundian Refugees in Tanzania: The Key Factor to the Burundi Peace Process," November 30, 1999, http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/africa/central-africa/burundi/Burundian%20Refugees%20in%20Tanzania%20The%20Key%20Factor%20to%20the%20Burundi%20Peace%20Process.pdf.
8. Refugees International. Ibid. See also, "Testimony of Thomas Perriello, U.S. Special Envoy for the Great Lakes of Africa, U.S. Department of State, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: U.S. Policy in Central Africa: The Imperative of Good Governance," February 10, 2016, http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/021016_Perriello_Testimony.pdf.
9. Action on Armed Violence. "On Cross-Border Small Arms and Light Weapons Trafficking Between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of Burundi," December 2015, https://aoav.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/AOAV-DRC-Burundi-Border-Assessment-Report-FINAL_en.pdf.

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