
RI BULLETIN

A POWERFUL VOICE FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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Burundi: Opportunities for the Reintegration of Internally Displaced and Refugees

In Burundi, despite the fragility of the political process and the ongoing fighting between the joint forces of the National Army and the Forces for the Defense of Democracy (FDD) against the Forces for National Liberation (FNL) rebels in the southern part of Bujumbura Rural province, thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) returning home have started to reintegrate in their areas of origin. This process holds promise for the future of Burundi and deserves international support.

In the last 10 months around 85,000 Burundians have returned from Tanzania, the majority of whom were assisted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The numbers have decreased significantly since August of this year mainly due to the uncertainty around the formal end in November of the 2000 Arusha agreement that was supposed to culminate with general elections, now postponed to April 2005. While on a visit last March, Refugees International (RI) was critical of UNHCR's lack of capacity and preparation for handling significant numbers of returnees, now the infrastructure and personnel are there and the agency, through its implementing partners, should be able to manage properly future returns at high levels.

The situation for the internally displaced inside the country varies by area of origin. Internal displacement continues to occur only in Bujumbura Rural province where still some 30,000 people have fled fighting. Meanwhile, during 2004, of the 280,000 displaced living in formal camps, more than half have returned to their "*collines*" [literally "hills," used in Burundi to designate communities]. This phenomenon has affected especially the eastern and southern provinces bordering with Tanzania, where deterioration of living conditions in the camps and the desire to recover their property prompted displaced returns. In the northern and central provinces, IDPs living in sites have decided not to return. They still fear for their personal security mainly due to strong feelings associated with the violent events of 1993, which erupted after the elections.

In the southeastern areas, with increased security, the next months should be seen as a great opportunity to strengthen and multiply reintegration programs that have shown some degree of success and currently continue to be implemented. In Ruyigi province RI visited one housing program targeting five communes that has provided 2,800 houses for vulnerable returnees. That program did not include any internally displaced, although there was a promise that a new expanded program for 5,000 houses, supported by the National Commission for the Rehabilitation of Disaster-affected People (CNRS) and UNHCR, would include a maximum portion of 15% of the houses for the most vulnerable returned IDPs. RI considers that this portion is still insufficient considering the great number of displaced who have gone back.

Besides housing programs, incentives and assistance with agriculture inputs are necessary to kick start economic activities and contribute to the creation of sustainable livelihoods. While traveling through Rutana province, the RI team stopped at a temporary seed market where returnees can acquire seeds in different quantities and combinations. “Particularly vulnerable returnees have been referred to us by local authorities from the hills and receive coupons for buying seeds from local sellers who convened here and will cash the coupons at the bank,” one humanitarian worker told RI. “Besides sustaining the local economy, the project serves as a reconciliation activity bringing benefits for people who stayed behind during the conflict and those who had left.”

Other services at community level are also indispensable for making reintegration work. Primary health care and schooling are lacking in many communes. Returning refugees find themselves in a worse situation, since in the Tanzania camps those services were available and they enjoyed free access to both. Internally displaced, suffering from assistance discontinued in favor of assisting refugees returning from Tanzania, continue to face serious problems in accessing those facilities.

Protection activities are also crucial for facilitating integration among returnees and recipient communities. Ethnically motivated hostility and competition over scarce resources, in particular access to land, are posing challenges to several communities. Improvements are nevertheless taking place. Local community initiatives such as *Bashingatahe* [Burundian traditional courts] and committees of elders have been able to settle land disputes or cases of thefts. While local initiatives are important, greater international presence also builds confidence. The RI team traveled through several provinces and could see how complete deployment and patrolling of peacekeepers have already brought a more secure atmosphere in the countryside. UNHCR protection officers are being assisted by some 25 human rights officials deployed by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights through the peacekeeping operation and it is expected that this synergy will better address protection concerns of all groups of returnees.

Expansion of existing programs and sustaining the process can only be assured through increased funding for governmental institutions and implementing agencies alike. In January of 2004 a donor conference held in Brussels pledged 1.03 billion dollars towards the rebuilding of the country. To date UNHCR has received only 17% of their appeal for the second half of 2004 while no pledges have been made for its \$65 million proposal for the 2005 program. The rebuilding effort should not wait until the full normalization of the country or be subjected to “democratization clauses” like the successful completion of the elections. Tens of thousands of returnees are struggling to restart a new life and only very little of the pledged money has been provided.

Refugees International recommends that:

- The Government of Burundi and in particular the Ministry for Reinsertion and Resettlement of Displaced and Repatriated Persons (MRRDR) provide greater resources to the CNRS in order to fulfill its assistance responsibilities within the program for return and reintegration of refugees and internally displaced.
- Donor governments, in particular Belgium, Germany and Great Britain, disburse money pledged at the January 2004 Donor Conference in Brussels. Existing programs which proved successful should be replicated in other areas of returns.
- UNHCR increase to 25% the quota of beneficiaries reserved to returning IDPs in all reintegration programs under implementation.
- UNHCHR should complete the deployment of human right officers to its full strength of 50 staff in order to provide assistance to UNHCR protection officers in all areas of return.