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# **BURUNDI: STABILITY DEPENDS ON SUCCESSFUL REINTEGRATION OF RETURNEES**

**Burundi is facing enormous challenges reintegrating thousands of refugees who spent decades in exile. To ensure long-term stability, the government of Burundi should address more vigorously land and property disputes between returnees and residents, and donor countries should strengthen local government bodies and help them boost services and livelihood opportunities for returnees.**

## **A Complex Return Process**

More than 420,000 Burundians who had fled successive conflicts for refuge in Tanzania have been returning home since January 2002. Many of those who returned in recent months were under pressure to do so from the government of Tanzania despite clear signs that the government of Burundi was not ready to rapidly absorb all the returnees. Recent arrivals are among the most vulnerable and are less self-sufficient in comparison to those who returned to Burundi earlier. As an indication of growing mistrust of the return process, hundreds of refugees who had registered for repatriation with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) “disappeared” between January and June 2008.

There are four categories of returnees who receive and require varying degrees of assistance. First, those who fled to Tanzania in 1972, when civil war broke out in Burundi, receive a small \$45 cash allowance when they return and are allowed to carry up to 100 kg of luggage per person. Out of 72,700 Burundians who have returned in 2008, some 15,000 are part of the 1972 caseload; in total some 45,000 people from the 1972 group are expected to return by next year. Second, refugees who fled a later conflict in 1993 are considered to be less self-sufficient, and therefore receive a six-month food package, other supplies, and the \$45 cash allowance.

A third category consists of spontaneous returnees who decided to return home because they feared being forcibly expelled or hoped to recover their land and property in a newly peaceful Burundi. During their journey back, many people suffered harassment and extortion from border forces, including rape of women and girls. Finally, people who were not legally refugees were forcibly expelled from Tanzania. Initially invited by the Tanzanian

## **Policy Recommendations**

- ❑ The government of Burundi should increase the capacity of the land commission, consider how to incorporate locally developed conflict resolution mechanisms, and legislate a solution to the 1972 cases of state land redistribution.
- ❑ The government of Burundi should invest in expanding basic services, livelihood creation and long-term economic development programs in areas of high returns.
- ❑ Donor countries should provide greater technical assistance to decentralized state structures and maintain funding levels for recovery activities.
- ❑ UNHCR should work closely with the government of Burundi to facilitate the social cohesion and the creation of community structures within the ‘peace villages’ program.

authorities to register, with the hope of integrating locally, they were later expelled from the country without notice or time to recover their belongings or documentation. The most vulnerable among these two categories of people do receive assistance upon return in a very random manner.

## Problems with Reintegration

Under Tanzanian government pressure, the Burundian authorities have been visiting camps in Tanzania and promising that people will be provided land and assistance if they return. However, the current level of effort by the government and other actors is not sufficient. The difficulty starts during the return process. Transit sites are overcrowded, notably Mabanda, which Refugees International recently visited. It is supposed to process a thousand people in two to three days, but instead families have been stuck there for more than two months. Six hundred people are permanently living in the center, while convoys of hundreds of people pass through it weekly.

People are delayed in the transit centers because they are unable to access their original land and homes. In many regions of Burundi, especially the southern provinces of Bururi and Makamba, the previous government encouraged people from other regions to settle areas left vacant. Thus, while those who fled in 1993 have had more success in accessing their land and homes, others, especially those who fled in 1972, have found them occupied. Returnees who have identified their property and cannot recover it are camping under the open sky or occupying public buildings (schools, municipal offices) while waiting for a resolution. Site congestion and anarchic settling of families are leaving people more vulnerable to epidemics and security incidents.

## Reinforce the Land Commission and Take Political Steps

The government is addressing the land issue through a commission mandated to help returnees recover their land or to relocate them elsewhere. Resolving cases is challenging due to the overall land shortage and the reality that for most Burundians, land is the primary economic resource, as well as a form of cultural wealth, because the family plot is viewed as the symbol of ethnic and family identity.

The number of land disputes is overwhelming the commission. In Macamba, for example, the provincial land commission receives between 20 to 50 cases per week, but only 5 to 10 are adjudicated. Further, the commission does not have the final decision because its proposed solutions can be challenged in court. This is resulting in congestion in the justice system, as some 70% of cases are related to land disputes. Specific legislation is needed to resolve at least those land disputes resulting from the post-1972 government decision to redistribute land belonging to those who had fled.

The government has decided to build new villages for the most vulnerable returnees who are unable to regain their previous property and for a small portion of vulnerable households who are still displaced internally. Refugees International visited the Muriza 'peace village' in Ruyigi province, where 98 houses have been constructed to host women-headed households. In order to avoid past errors, the village is being built close to public services, like schools, health centers, and water sources, and each family is provided with agricultural land. According to local officials, this village will be administratively structured like other villages in the country, but creating villages solely of vulnerable people raises questions as to their economic viability.

## Livelihoods and Education

Government and donor-supported programs need to plan greater agricultural opportunities as well as other types of livelihood activities. However, the current reintegration effort is focusing on providing land and creating agricultural livelihoods for the returnees with limited consideration of other options. Many former refugees, especially those born in the camps in Tanzania, are looking forward to using other skills through micro-credit or other livelihood programs, but these programs are not yet available. Livelihood programs must reflect that farming is not always the preferred option for returning refugees.

Education is supposed to be free at the primary level and for the first two years of secondary schooling. Yet, schools are overcrowded and returnee children who do not pay are not admitted. Primary school teachers are not being trained for the schools that are being built, and donors are not funding secondary education. The enrollment rate for returnee girls is lower than that for other girls. It is worrisome that some children and youngsters among the returnees are dropping out of school to join the rebel military group National Liberation Front (FNL) in order to access demobilization benefits. Developing economic opportunities for youth needs to be a priority.

Burundi is facing obstacles to reintegration that are typical of situations of large-scale return. While living for years in refugee camps, many returnees became dependent on external support, and they now are finding it challenging to provide for themselves. Additionally, some tensions are arising between returnees, internally displaced people and residents since the two latter groups, who are also vulnerable, are not being assisted. To prevent mounting tensions, it is crucial that the return process benefit entire communities as well as their most vulnerable members.

*Advocate Mpako Foaleng and Senior Advocate Andrea Lari assessed the situation for returnees in Burundi in August.*