

## Burundi's Refugees: Repatriation, Land Disputes and Tanzania

The Great Lakes Policy Forum was honored to host Brian Sage of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and Wendy Henning and Margaret McKelvey of the U.S. Department of State at this month's session. The discussion centered on the finalization of a voluntary repatriation process for the 1993 refugee caseload, which began in 2003 and will tentatively come to an end on June 30, 2009. They number approximately 40,000 people.

The session started with a video commissioned by the Canadian government for UNHCR, which described the process of repatriation and naturalization, both in Tanzania and Quebec, for Burundian refugees. The video provided a context for the discussion, giving a visual representation of the reintegration and land dispute issues that refugees confront whether they choose to return to Burundi, remain in Tanzania or apply for refugee status abroad.

Earlier this year, the U.S. State Department contracted the Terra P Group to conduct an impact evaluation of PRM's humanitarian assistance to Burundi refugees. Terra P assessed the refugees' perceptions of life in Burundi, as well as the technical evidence on ground (e.g. the economic status of returnees vs. incumbents, current assets and savings, health, security and other human assets, etc), with positive results.

In general, the returnees do not perceive life in Burundi to be harder than the life they have lived in Tanzania, and are not economically worse off than their counterparts who have lived in Burundi. Most have also found the repatriation package beneficial and are ultimately happy and satisfied to be back home. Nonetheless, the majority of refugees have found integration to be preferable to repatriation and have largely chosen to remain in Tanzania and naturalize.

For voluntary returnees, organizations such as the IRC have been manning camps and trying to facilitate a smooth transition, in conjunction with UNHCR and international stakeholders such as the U.S. government. There are, of course, a number of challenges they face in their operations, not least of which is the looming deadline for the completion of the process. The short deadline not only creates logistic overload, it also means that there is no plan in place for those who wish to remain in Tanzania but are not currently in resettlement camps or willing to naturalize.

In Burundi, the program is managed slightly differently, taking into account the government's capacity to manage the tenuous peace in the country; the need for foreign donor support; unaccompanied minors whose parents or other support systems need to be traced; and livelihood and job skills training for unemployed youth who may or may not be educated.

It is clear that the Burundian government needs the help and support of multi-lateral agencies, as well as foreign national governments if they are to succeed at their development goals. Organizations such as the IRC have worked in support of decentralization, empowering local governments to address local issues and thus taking some of the burden off the federal government, but more time is needed to ensure that repatriation occurs smoothly, efficiently and with the least amount of stress for the returnees and those who support them.

Likewise, it cannot be expected that Tanzania will grant citizenship to all remaining refugees, and a proactive plan to deal with this population needs to be implemented quickly, and in tandem with other existing processes.