

Great Lakes Policy Forum  
Meeting Report  
June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2002

At this month's Forum we heard from Ambassador Richard Bogosian, a former Special Assistant to the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative of USAID, Joel Frushone, an Africa Policy Analyst from the US Committee on Refugees, Anne Edgerton, an Advocate from Refugees International and Howard Wolpe, a Senior Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center. Their presentations centered on an analysis of the diplomatic, political and humanitarian challenges facing the transitional government and the peace process in Burundi.

**The Conflict**

The conflict in Burundi has not changed recently. The two main Hutu rebel groups, the FLN and the FDD are still actively fighting government forces. Not only is the conflict still continuing, but it is also showing no signs of winding down. However, despite the enduring violence, there has been no indication that either side is gaining a strategic advantage. From time to time, it seems as though the government is gaining some ground, but they still have not been able to defeat the rebel forces

This continued fighting has been disastrous for Burundian civilians. Battles often occur in areas with a civilian population, such as the recent outbreak of violence in the north Bujumbura suburbs. One panelist wondered if the government is possibly creating regroupment camps, particularly in the East, in an effort to clear certain areas to allow for military fighting. This action would serve to avoid civilian casualties and disruptions. If regroupment camps are indeed being established, it might suggest that Burundi's government is acting in a moment of desperation since it knows that there is little support within the international community for the creation of these camps. Regroupment camps are often ill equipped to deal with human needs resulting in much human suffering.

Thus, the consensus remains that a ceasefire in Burundi is crucial. If anything else is to progress in Burundi – the economy, the stability of the government, the humanitarian situation – there must first be an end to the fighting. But the question remains: what must happen in order to bring the various groups together in a ceasefire? Is any party capable of making a move that will end the current impasse?

One panelist noted that in the past, the negotiation process has been sporadic and ineffective. Much of this can be blamed on the fact that no team has ever been continually in charge of either preparation in advance of meetings or follow-ups once a decision has been made. In order to ensure more successful ceasefire talks in the future some participants insisted that the international community must regard South Africa as the main facilitator, and that the rebels must be more openly and directly brought into the discussion.

Although some participants believed in the importance of recognizing South Africa as the main facilitator in the Burundian peace process, there has been on-going confusion regarding the role of South Africa as well as the role of Tanzania as facilitators. Many have been questioning who has the lead, or who should have the lead? Are the two countries competing or coordinating in their efforts to help Burundi? There is also the issue of the individual agendas held by regional states such as Uganda. To what extent do these agendas aid or inhibit the ceasefire talks? However, the overriding question in the discussion of outside actors remains clear: when will the facilitation begin to show some progress?

### **The Transitional Government**

The situation in Burundi with the current transitional government was described by one of our panelists as “so far so good”. Tutsi president Buyoya is in the middle of his 18-month term as transitional leader and to date, the government is operational. One panelist believed that since last November, Burundi’s transition to a shared government has been generally successful and does represent a certain level of progress.

Despite the successes, questions are being raised as to what will happen at the end of the 18-month period. The government is anxious over the lack of a ceasefire and many are wondering if Buyoya will ignore the original agreement by trying to extend his time as president. One panelist mentioned two growing suspicions surrounding the transitional government. The first is that the Hutus are avoiding negotiations until the time when a Hutu will be president and the second is that Buyoya is playing games so he can stay on as president. The concern was also raised that there are possible strains amongst the leaders of FRODEBU and many wonder how this could affect the transitional government.

Even more worrisome are the hints of corruption coming from inside the government. It is believed that some insiders are doing very well because of the war and therefore it is in their best interest that the war continues. This suspicion is fueling the reluctance of donors to get involved in Burundi. For the sake of Burundians who are so desperately in need of aid, it is imperative that donors are given a way to provide meaningful assistance to Burundi. All of these issues must be watched closely in the coming months to ensure that a crisis does not erupt at the end of this transitional period.

### **The Refugees**

The unrelenting fighting in Burundi has turned numerous Burundians into either IDP’s or refugees. There are currently 350,000 Burundian refugees in Tanzania and while these numbers are continuously rising, the flow of new refugees from Burundi is lessening. In fact, many of the refugees now entering the camps are “recyclers” who have attempted to return home to Burundi only to turn back and reenter the Tanzanian refugee camps. The number of recyclers entering the camps remains high.

The current refugee situation raises both political and humanitarian concerns. Recently, the Tanzanian Minister of the Interior and Minister of Repatriation, Reinstallation, and Reinsertion told the Burundian refugees that now is the time for them to return to their homes. Along with this declaration came increased security concerns around the camps as Burundians are facing more harassment from police as well as facing the fears that go along with being unwanted visitors. These refugees are now being used as pawns in a political game between Burundi and Tanzania. Some experts are arguing that the Burundian government has been provoking the government of Tanzania by accusing them of harboring, arming and training rebels, and thus point to Tanzania's orders for the forced repatriation of Burundian refugees as a result of these provocations.

The humanitarian aspect of the refugee issue is significant. A recent finding noted by experts in the field is the increasingly visible difference between Burundians who attempt repatriation and those who choose to stay in the camps. Those staying in the camps are Burundians who have been educated to significant levels in Burundi before becoming refugees. This issue is a major social class development and one that many believe needs further attention and discussion.

There is also the humanitarian issue of how to reintegrate repatriating refugees back into Burundi. Refugees, particularly from rural areas, are returning to areas poorer than those that they left. Their homes, infrastructure and land have been destroyed by the war. Despite the fact that a strategy for reintegration is badly needed, the government has shown no real concern for the reintegration of refugees, or for those returning to rural areas. This lack of concern has fueled disappointment where the transitional government is concerned. As a result, unhappiness with and resistance to the transitional government is growing. This situation begs the question of how much disappointment and citizen frustration will it take before this group will mobilize and destabilize the transitional government and the peace process.