

January 12th, 2007, the Great Lakes Policy Forum

On January 12th, 2007, the Great Lakes Policy Forum convened to discuss the current situation in Burundi, in an event titled “Burundi at Peace: What Does It Mean?” The speakers included Ms. Maria Burnett; Human Rights Watch, Dr. Howard Wolpe; Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and Professor Peter Uvin; Tufts University. Dr. Dorina Bekoe (USIP) moderated the event. The following is a brief summary of the discussion.

The government of Burundi is mostly ignoring issues of human rights and avoids discussing the subject. Nonetheless, several matters should be discussed. Regarding the killings in Muyinga, it seems the orders were given from the military to carry them out, but it is hard to pinpoint from whom exactly, due to the President’s fear of provoking conflict with the military. The recent arrests related to the alleged coup plot in August were high-profile, but the cases very weak, and it seems that these arrests were simply to stifle dissent and could become part of a trend. On a positive note, there has been remarkable improvement in the health and education sectors, but in the area of tolerance and justice, the progress that has been made is “precarious”.

There are more positive developments to note in Burundi: Although there are major tensions, they are not being characterized along Hutu/Tutsi lines, but rather as media versus the government or the government versus the opposition. There is also progress in the areas of rural development and internal revenue generation. Moreover, while the government does not seem to tackle human rights abuses head on, it at least acknowledges they take place, which was never before done in Burundi. Corruption is being actively combated by the government, in spite of opposition from government members affiliated with previous regimes. It is important to understand the mentality of the current government. They are former rebels with little or no experience; although there is a long way to go, if we focus on the positives, it will help the government come out of its paranoid mentality and open the lines of communication.

The discussion then moved to identifying what the average person in Burundi (in mostly rural settings) thinks about ideals such as peace, security, and human rights. Although 33% of the people define peace as negative (i.e. the absence of war or violent conflict), the remaining two thirds define peace as positive, referring to social mobility, good governance, and the availability of food. Burundians express that security has improved, but is still fragile, as banditry is a concern in rural areas. Furthermore, there is a unanimous consensus among the general population that peace between ethnicities is not only desirable but also essential for the well-being of all.