

Burundi: Prospects for Peace



CRISPIN HUGHES/PANOS PICTURES

Heru Ushinga camp for Burundian Hutu refugees near Kasulu, Tanzania.

Bujumbura, Burundi, February 2000 – ‘I have been here with my wife and nine children since October last year. I am a plumber by trade, not a rebel’, says David, 42.

David lives in one of Burundi’s infamous ‘regroupment camps’. These camps have been a central part of the Burundian government’s strategy in the ongoing civil war with armed rebels in the Central African country. Last year, some 350,000 people were forced into such camps.

‘Before I was brought here, I had a good life’, explains David, ‘I could provide for my family. The day the army came for us, I was going to work at about 5.30 in the morning and the soldiers were waiting for us. They pushed us together, shooting all the time and shouting.

‘They told us not to move and held us there, standing all day. We thought we were going to die. They told us “Today will be a very bad day for you.” The children were crying and terrified. We were ordered to march by the soldiers who were shooting in the air and beating us with their rifle butts. There were thousands

of us and we had nothing more than the clothes we were wearing.

‘We were taken into this camp and just left cold and hungry for four days, sleeping on the ground.’

The move was sudden and the interns – 30,000 in this camp – were not allowed to bring any belongings with them. Five months later, they mill around in rotting, blackened clothes, battered by the baking sun and the afternoon storms.

And everywhere are the soldiers with automatic weapons and sticks. ‘Some of them rape the women and young girls and many teenage girls are pregnant with the soldiers’ babies’, says David.¹

Residents in the area also accuse rebels of looting houses and fields in search of food and supplies. ‘Rebels come here and loot our crops, take our money by force and beat us up’, said one resident. ‘The [government] army accuses us of supporting the rebels. ‘How can we support them while they are looting our things?’ he said.

Burundian civilians are caught between the fighting sides, victims of a war that is not theirs.²

A troubled history

Burundi has experienced conflict during most of its history since independence in 1962. While the violence has generally been interpreted as 'ethnic', it is in fact political, aimed at maintaining or capturing power. Controlling the state is of major importance in this poor country, as it is the main avenue for accumulation and reproduction of a dominant class. Ethnicity is a strong mobilizing force, used and manipulated by elites in their political strategies. As so many people have been killed because of their ethnic belonging, it has become a major political variable in its own right.

The latest violence started when the army, which is dominated by the minority Tutsi, staged a coup d'état against a regime which had been democratically elected in June 1993. Only months later, on 21 October 1993, the Hutu President Melchior Ndadaye was assassinated by the military. Large-scale violence immediately erupted all over the country and about 50,000 people, more or less as many Hutu as Tutsi, were killed.

This episode had a dual effect. On the one hand, a 'creeping coup' began, which erased the electoral verdict, shelved the democratic constitution and allowed the elite of the previous regimes to recapture much of the power lost through the ballot. On the other, a civil war started in mid-1994, when three Hutu-dominated rebel groups started to engage the army. Tens of thousands of civilians were killed and many more were internally displaced or sought refuge abroad.

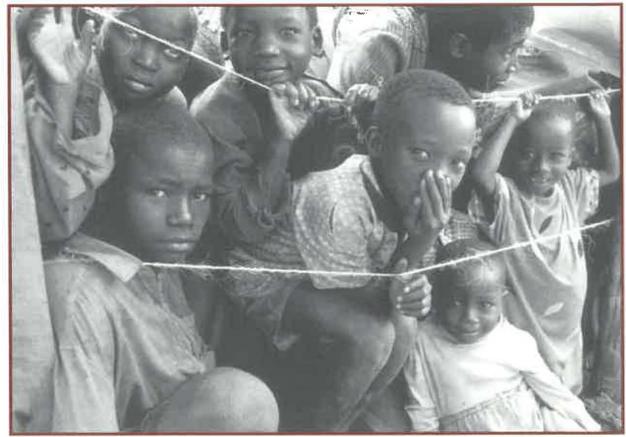
The institutions of the state were increasingly paralysed and the party that won the 1993 elections, FRODEBU, was unable to function; many of its leaders were killed, jailed or went into exile. In July 1996, the military leader who lost the 1993 presidential election, Major Pierre Buyoya, returned to power through a coup.

Negotiating a way out

The new regime embarked on attempts to find a negotiated settlement to the crisis. While internal accommodations were sought, the centre of the peace process moved to Arusha (Tanzania) in mid-1998. Burundian parties met under the leadership of former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, who was appointed as mediator by the regional heads of state. After Nyerere's death in 1999, Nelson Mandela took over his task.

Although progress was achieved in Arusha, differences of position remain on important points, such as the management of a period of political transition towards definitive institutions, the reform of the army, international peace-keeping and the way in which majority rule can be combined with minority protection. Parties also differ on the reading of Burundian history; thus both Hutu and Tutsi feel that they have been the victim of genocide at the hands of the other ethnic group, while the Twa have been victimized by all parties to the conflict.

Even though an accord has been signed, it is not certain that all parties will genuinely adhere to it. The possibility of a violent rejection of an externally imposed agreement cannot be ruled out.



CRISPIN HUGHES/PANOS PICTURES

Burundian Hutu refugee children at Heru Oshinga camp near Kasulu, Tanzania.

Burundians are not just Hutu or Tutsi

Because of both history and contemporary events, the notion of 'groups' and 'minorities' in Burundi tends to refer exclusively to Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. This is due to the fact that all conflicts and divisions in Burundian society are reinterpreted in terms of these ethnic divisions. Yet other cleavages are at least as important.

Apart from regional and clan antagonisms, a major cleavage is that between urban and rural Burundi. Rural people, although constituting over 90 per cent of the population, are heavily discriminated against in terms of standard of living, health services and education. They have also been the major victims of violence and human rights abuse.

Women in Burundi, as elsewhere in Africa and the world, are another massively disadvantaged group. While they constitute over half the population, they are discriminated against in all spheres of society: politics and the civil service, the economy, education, the justice system. Not one single woman participated in the Arusha negotiations, where the future of the country was debated. Yet women have borne the brunt of the conflict. As more men than women have been killed or jailed, or have joined the rebel movements, most single-parent households are headed by women, who must ensure their families' survival in extraordinarily harsh circumstances. With the government army and rebel groups engaged in operations country-wide, women have also experienced sexual violence much more than in peace-time.

The ethnic group that is worst off is one that is hardly ever mentioned in the debate on Burundi. The Twa number less than 1 per cent of the total population; while they are the earliest known inhabitants of Burundi and self-identify as 'indigenous', they are marginalized socially, culturally, economically and politically, and despised by Hutu and Tutsi alike. Even in normal times, the major issue confronting the Twa is discrimination, which takes the forms of negative stereotyping, segregation and denial of rights. The Twa have been particularly vulnerable in the context of violent conflict in the Great Lakes Region. As they do not fit into the Hutu/Tutsi bipolar divide, they are

forced to 'take sides', and as a result become the victims of killings by both camps in a war that is not theirs.

Reforming the state

The issues confronting the negotiators in Arusha, and which will eventually have to be addressed by whoever is entrusted with governing Burundi, relate to the proper functioning of the state in such a fashion that no citizen feels left out. Among others, these issues are democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights; the security apparatus; education and health; and the management of the economy.

The relations between rulers and ruled are distant, authoritarian and paternalistic: urban politicians claim to know what is best for rural populations, but in reality they are engaged in power politics played out in the capital, Bujumbura (and its extraterritorial extension Arusha), without regard to the rest of the country. Most parties lack even a genuine urban base and are simply instruments for the promotion of personal and sectarian interests. Thus, creating a viable political system will require more than accommodating elite ethnic concerns and claims; such a system will need to include all Burundians as citizens, actively concerned by and involved in the running of the affairs of state.

Years of conflict have nearly destroyed the already weak social sectors. The health and education indicators have fallen dramatically. A major injection of resources is essential, not just for the sake of a much-needed improvement of these sectors, but also as a means of ensuring peace. Better access for disadvantaged regional, ethnic and gender groups must not be provided at the expense of those who are now (relatively) privileged. A win-win strategy is required: the cake must be made larger, with significant new resources being allocated to even up the proportions.

The future

It has been stated on several occasions during the last decade that 'Burundi is at the crossroads'. This is again the case today. Compared to Rwanda, Burundi has the advantage that there is a dialogue between political and military actors, despite the fact that they are also fighting it out on the ground. A collapse of the Arusha accord and of internal attempts at political accommodation would discredit peaceful solutions for years to come and the country would probably fall into a new period of protracted violent strife.

The international community must therefore provide the political and financial support necessary to give peace a chance. The reform of the army, the rehabilitation and improvement of health, education and justice, and the restructuring of the economy will require more resources than Burundi can generate. However, the amounts needed are relatively small, showing how much difference modest outlays can make in a small economy and a poorly funded state.

Non-state actors, such as human rights and national development associations, production and distribution cooperatives, the private media and professional groupings, will need to be strengthened, in order to allow them to participate in the efforts at democratization, reconciliation and development.

While Burundi is itself the theatre of instability and violence, it is at the same time threatened by events surrounding it. The ongoing conflict in the DRC, the constantly shifting alliances in the region, and the illegal cross-border extractive activities have a perverse impact on peace-making in Burundi. However, if Burundi were to achieve a durable settlement, it would also serve as an example for other trouble spots in Central and East Africa. Conversely, if Burundi were to revert to massive violence, this would further compound an already explosive regional situation.



THOMAS BOSTAD / PANOS PICTURES

Tailor teaching at Magara Camp, Burundi.

Recommendations

1. The international community should continue to support the peace process by providing diplomatic and financial backing, coordinated approaches and mediation in a search for durable solutions which are impartial and are seen to be impartial by parties within Burundi.
2. Proposals/solutions for peace should be inclusive of the views and interests of all sectors of society including those of the most marginalized groups and groups disadvantaged for reasons other than those of ethnicity in order to avoid a return to the cycles of violence that have affected the country since independence.
3. The international community must support solutions for peace by injecting resources into key sectors of the country such as health, education and the justice system.
4. A priority for peace is the restructuring of the army and civilian security forces under international supervision and with international assistance.
5. Integrated plans of action should be prepared to deal with the problems posed by the demobilization of tens of thousands of government troops and rebels, addressing areas of potential conflict such as housing, land and resources, control of local government and other key sectors.
6. International development and government policies in post-conflict Burundi should focus on redressing discrimination against groups disadvantaged by their ethnicity, gender, location or for other reasons, with a view to supporting implementation of international human and minority rights standards.
7. The government of Burundi should prioritize measures to implement basic international human and minority rights standards.
8. The international community should support the institution of mechanisms – such as a national truth and reconciliation commission or an international criminal tribunal – to address impunity for the mass violations of human rights that have occurred in Burundi's recent past.
9. Civil society organizations at the local, regional and national level must be supported by the government and the international community and unarmed democratic political groups must be promoted and protected.

Notes

1. Nutt, D. 'The Terror that is Burundi's Regroupment Camps', ACT, Africa News Service, 24 Feb. 2000.
2. Reuters, 18 Feb. 2000.

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