

**FROM REFUGEE CRISIS TO REINTEGRATION CRISIS?  
THE CONSEQUENCES OF REPATRIATION  
TO (POST-) TRANSITION BURUNDI\***

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**Résumé**

Presque un demi-million de réfugiés sont retournés pendant et après la transition burundaise. Face à l'insécurité physique et socioéconomique et l'instabilité politique, ce nombre est remarquable, mais en même temps pose un nouveau défi pour le pays. Malgré les défauts dans la mise à disposition des services publics, la première étape de la réintégration avait plus ou moins réussi. Mais des problèmes structurels sérieux restent irrésolus. En particulier, la question d'accès à la terre a déjà provoqué des conflits réguliers entre rapatriés et résidents ainsi qu'autres groupes.

Si une solution politique complète n'est pas trouvée pour les problèmes existants de réintégration, les tensions vont probablement s'accroître et développer le potentiel de déborder de l'échelon local. En se basant sur une évaluation de la fuite, l'exil et le retour de réfugiés burundais et le fond politique de ces processus, l'article constate un potentiel politique d'instrumentalisation.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Post-conflict countries undergoing far-reaching political change are facing an exceptionally difficult set of challenges. On the one side, the process of political transformation – in this case towards a more democratic system – has to be managed. This refers not only to the installation and consolidation of institutions, but also the adaptation of actors to the new political context. On the other hand, this transformation goes hand in hand with a peace process based on a negotiated agreement which has to be implemented. What could be called the 'conflict baggage' in societies deeply divided by a civil war mainly contains the challenges of (re)integration, (re)construction and (re)conciliation<sup>1</sup>. While these tasks would require a capable state and a stable political situation, it is in the nature of negotiated conflict settlements that these conditions are not met. Groups formerly divided by civil war now have to agree on the rules of the game while the opening of the political space and increased competition through elections might provide incentives for renewed confrontation. Thus, the peace process with all its burdens is accompanied by a rather fragile political situation, a constellation which clearly shows in the case of Burundi.

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<sup>1</sup> The brackets are used, because the prefix « re » implies that there is a status the country can return to. This might not always be the case, either because there never has been such a status in the past (e.g. no real integrated society) or because the conflict has changed the preconditions so significantly that a completely new path has to be taken. Nonetheless, for the reason of simplicity, in the following the words are used without brackets.

In focusing on the issue of refugee return and reintegration during and after the Burundian transition<sup>2</sup>, this article analyzes how this challenge derived from civil war is linked to the political process. The aim is to go beyond the understanding of refugee reintegration as a mere humanitarian and socio-economic issue. A view on the roots of the refugee crisis, the exile situation and the repatriation movement shows that the refugee issue has always been a political one. Accordingly, this article uses the word « crisis » not only referring to a humanitarian emergence, but as a condition threatening the (political) stability of a country. The consequences of the return and reintegration process in Burundi are, thus, discussed with the underlying question if they might be exploited politically with the potential to further erode the already fragile (post)transition process.

This process is characterized by great uncertainty due to emerging splits and shifting alliances within and between parties and a lack of clear political profiles. The consequential paralysis of political institutions and low governance capacity are accompanied by an insufficient protection of human rights and civil liberties. In this situation – that rather displays deadlock and insecurity than political consolidation – post-conflict challenges like the reinsertion of refugees might lead to political manipulation.

The analysis of this risk generally rests on the assumption that exile, repatriation and reintegration are closely linked and that return does not make refugees disappear as a distinct social group.

## 2. RESEARCHING REFUGEES

In the field of refugee studies, the research focus has slowly shifted from the original flight to asylum and resettlement in the 1980s and further on to repatriation in the 1990s<sup>3</sup>. Return – imagined and actually experienced – attracted increasing academic attention inducing the assumption that it is indeed not the end of the refugee cycle<sup>4</sup>. Notions of returning « home » have increasingly been questioned because after years or decades in exile their place of origin may not be familiar to refugees anymore. Similarly, their expectations towards return will often be neither clear nor realistic.<sup>5</sup>

Another strand of recent literature refers back to the actual exile situation and explores the phenomenon of refugee manipulation – or more specifically militarization. This strand of literature links refugees to violent

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<sup>2</sup> Though the article follows the common understanding of a transition period ending with the first general elections, it does not automatically assume that Burundi is on a straight path towards a consolidated democracy. The expression « post-transition » is simply used to structure the time frame and mark the period after 2005.

<sup>3</sup> MUGGERIDGE, H., DONA, G., “Back Home? Refugees’ Experiences of their First Visit back to their Country of Origin”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2006, pp. 415-432.

<sup>4</sup> LONG, L. D., OXFELD, E., *Coming Home? Refugees, Migrants, and Those Who Stayed Behind*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press 2004.

<sup>5</sup> MALKKI, L. H., *Purity in Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 260.

conflict which is not only seen as a cause but also as a consequence of their flight. These studies ultimately try to explain how refugees can produce new conflicts or bring about the spill-over of existing ones. Labeled with expressions such as neighborhood effect<sup>6</sup> or « refugee warrior »<sup>7</sup>, displacement across borders has increasingly been seen in connection to political and military activities of rebel groups outside their home territory.<sup>8</sup> Thus, recent academic research has not only stressed the persistence of the refugee experience, but also its political entanglement.

In assessing and analyzing the Burundian refugee crisis and the return and reintegration process, this article follows the line of insights from both developments in the relevant literature. Firstly, it does presume that refugees, or then called returnees, remain a relevant social category after their « homecoming ». Secondly, information on the origin of the refugee crisis, politicization and militarization of Burundian refugees in exile and the political background of their return are taken into account for assessing (potential) consequences of repatriation.

### 3. THE BURUNDIAN REFUGEE CRISIS: FROM CONFLICT TO EXILE AND BACK?

With an already significant refugee population after the events of 1965 and especially 1972, the Burundian refugee crisis really took hold after the assassination of President Ndadaye in 1993 and the following outbreak of the civil war. The main host countries were located within the Great Lakes region with Tanzania receiving by far the biggest group of Burundians fleeing their country.

On the peak of the crisis in 2002 the Burundian refugee population officially comprising 574,471 persons was the second largest worldwide in absolute terms, only outnumbered by the huge group of Afghan refugees.<sup>9</sup> However, this rate which is already significant for a small country like Burundi only reflects half the truth. In fact, by 2003, at least 800,000 Burundian refugees were living in Tanzania alone. Even the UNHCR estimated that in addition to those refugees living in camps there were about 200,000 old caseload refugees from 1972 mainly in three settlements and up to 270,000 dispersed refugees in Tanzanian villages, predominantly outside official

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<sup>6</sup> WEINER, M., "Bad Neighbors – Bad Neighborhoods: An Inquiry into the Causes of Refugee Flows", *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Summer 1996), pp. 5-42.

<sup>7</sup> ADELMAN, H., "Why Refugee Warriors are Threats", *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1, Spring 1998; available at: <http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/JCS/SPR98/>.

<sup>8</sup> MUGGAH, R. (ed.), *No Refuge: The Crisis of Refugee Militarization in Africa*, London: Zed Books 2006; LISCHER, S. K., *Dangerous Sanctuaries – Refugee Camps, Civil War and the Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid*, Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press 2005; STEDMAN, S. J., TANNER, F. (eds.), *Refugee Manipulation: War, Politics, and the Abuse of Human Suffering*, Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, *2002 UNHCR Statistical Yearbook – Trends in Displacement, Protection and Solutions*, July 2004, p. 18.

records and aid flows.<sup>10</sup> The following account will mainly focus on the first two groups as information on dispersed refugees is naturally limited.

### 3.1 The origin and features of flight: from 1972 to 2002

The first larger outflow of Burundian refugees took place in the course of bloodshed in 1972 when revolts were followed by the liquidation of mainly educated Hutu. While the estimated number of refugees in this context ranges from slightly more than 90,000 to 300,000<sup>11</sup>, they indisputably fled mainly from the Southern part of Burundi where access to land is particularly problematic.<sup>12</sup> Today these people and their descendants basically live in three settlements within Tanzania – Katumba, Mishamo and Ulyankulu in Tabora and Rukwa regions. Humanitarian organizations have withdrawn from these sites in the 1980s as they became self-sustaining.

However, there has been a short period of major return of the 1972 refugees at the time of the election victory of the « Front pour la démocratie au Burundi » (FRODEBU) in 1993. Some 50,000<sup>13</sup> Burundians returned spontaneously, and a common observation among experts holds that the land disputes caused by refugee return at that time significantly contributed to the deterioration of the political situation.<sup>14</sup> Though it is difficult to substantiate this link and quantify its importance for the final outbreak of hostilities, it is clear that the « Commission Nationale de Rapatriement » (CNR) established in 1991 was not able to resolve the controversies over land in Rumonge at the fertile shore of Lake Tanganyika and that repatriation in the context of the elections overall took place in a disordered manner. Thus, forced expropriations of those occupying the land of refugees from 1972 took place and very likely enhanced existing tensions.<sup>15</sup> With the destabilization after the death of Ndadaye many returnees once again became refugees and fled as part of a new displacement wave.

As already mentioned, at the end of this wave and the time of beginning peace negotiations more than 500,000 Burundians lived in the

<sup>10</sup> NGAYIMPENDA, É., *Évaluation de la Politique Sectorielle de Rapatriement, de Réinsertion et de Réhabilitation des Sinistrés au Burundi*, Observatoire de l'Action Gouvernementale/OAG, Bujumbura 11 May 2005, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Even in rather recent publications, numbers still differ significantly, from about 100,000 (NIMUBONA, J., "Mémoires de réfugiés et de déplacés du Burundi : lecture critique de la politique publique de réhabilitation", in GUICHAOUA, A. (ed.), *Exilés, réfugiés, déplacés en Afrique centrale et orientale*, Paris, Éditions Karthala, 2004, pp. 213-245, p. 220) to 150,000 (NGAYIMPENDA, É., *op. cit.*, p. 7) and even 300,000 (ICG, "Réfugiés et Déplacés au Burundi : Désamorcer la Bombe Foncière", *ICG Rapport Afrique*, n° 70, Nairobi/Brussels, 7 October 2003, p. i).

<sup>12</sup> UNCHR, *Burundi : Bulletin Réfugiés*, Bujumbura, n° 16, Sept.-Oct. 2007, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> ICG, "Réfugiés et Déplacés au Burundi", *op. cit.*, p. i.

<sup>14</sup> KAMUNGI, P. M., OKETCH, J. S., HUGGINS, C., "Land Access and Refugee Repatriation: The case of Burundi, African Centre for Technology Studies", *Eco-Conflicts*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2004, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> NIMUBONA, J., *op. cit.*, p. 224.

refugee camps in Western Tanzania.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to earlier refugee movements these people came from a wider range of Burundian provinces. The distribution of refugees by region of origin was influenced by the intensity and duration of fighting, the proximity to the (Tanzanian) border and demographic factors.<sup>17</sup> Thus, provinces like Muyinga, Ruyigi, Makamba and Gitega faced larger population outflows.

Similar to the civil war, displacement took on an ethnic face in the course of violence after 1993. As with earlier waves of refugees the absolute majority of people leaving the country were Hutu who felt threatened by the Tutsi dominated army. However, since 1993 there was the new phenomenon of internal displacement. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) mainly settled close to urban centers and military positions in search for protection from rebel movement activities. With about 281,000 people internally displaced in about 226 sites by 2003<sup>18</sup> this form of displacement was another severe outcome of the conflict. But furthermore, the lines of flight itself resembled the ethnic coloring of the war, or at least are often interpreted in these terms. While the main ethnic affiliation of refugees who crossed international borders seems entirely clear, IDPs are often labeled as being predominantly Tutsi. While this is a common assumption within Burundi some international actors reject a clear ethnic attribution of internal displacement.<sup>19</sup> At the basis of this dispute there is mainly a different use of terms. Especially Burundian experts often differentiate between permanent internal displacement referring to those living in camp-like conditions and those who have either been received individually in families or institutions for shorter periods of time (*dispersés*) or who have been victims of regroupment camps<sup>20</sup> between 1995 and 2000 (*regroupés*).<sup>21</sup> Since a majority of those who gathered in sites close to military posts are supposed to be Tutsi and most « *dispersés* » and « *regroupés* » Hutu, the displacement issue can be interpreted in ethnic terms. In contrast to this classification, all internally displaced persons may be placed in one category without any sub-division which blurs the ethnic lines.

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<sup>16</sup> ICG, "Réfugiés et Déplacés au Burundi", *op. cit.*, p. i.

<sup>17</sup> NGAYIMPENDA, É., *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> ICG, "Réfugiés et Déplacés au Burundi", *op. cit.*, p. i.

<sup>19</sup> Interviews, Bujumbura, October-November 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Regroupment refers to the forced relocation of Hutu populations into camps guarded by armed forces mainly during two periods, 1996-7 and 1999-2000. During 1996 at least 250,000 people were forced into regroupment camps in the provinces of Karuzi, Kayanza and Muramvya, while in the second round about 350,000 civilians were moved to 53 camps in Bujumbura-rural. The declared goal of this government policy was the protection of people living in areas of rebel activities. But many observers rather saw it as an attempt to deprive rebels of local support and to regain territory. Besides miserable living conditions, the displaced in regroupment camps also faced serious human rights violations by the government and rebel forces. The camps of the second wave of regroupment were closed by the government after international pressure in 2000 (Norwegian Refugee Council / Global IDP Project, Profile of International Displacement: Burundi, Compilation of the information available in the Global IDP Database of the Norwegian Refugee Council, Geneva 5 February 2003, p. 9, p. 25f).

<sup>21</sup> This differentiation also appears in international reports.

An ethnic interpretation of the displacement issue is not uncommon, and the 1993 refugees are often perceived as being responsible for violence against Tutsi civilians or as being a Hutu rebel by those who have been internally displaced. On the other hand, refugees sometimes see IDPs as natural allies of the military.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the refugee crisis starting in 1993 did not only signify a remarkable humanitarian catastrophe, but displacement also got an ethnic face. These factors as well as their political roots seemed to make a militarization and/or politicization of Burundian refugees likely, potentially leading to what Lemarchand called « the transformation of refugee-generating conflicts into conflict-generating refugees ».<sup>23</sup>

### 3.2 Mobilization in exile: refugees and politics

It is a common assumption that refugees tend to be more extreme and less compromising in their views on the conflict constellation which has been at the root of their flight. In the case of Burundian refugees believes about historical antagonisms between Hutu and Tutsi making them generally incompatible are supposed to be particularly strong among those in exile.<sup>24</sup> For Hutu refugees in Tanzania this has been demonstrated by Liisa Malkki who discovered that those living in camps imagined themselves as a moral and political community and, ultimately, as a nation in exile.<sup>25</sup> In addition, it has been found that refugee elites from 1972 whose education was the very reason or at least catalyst for their flight often became politicized and a symbol for refugee empowerment.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond these specific insights on certain parts of the Burundian refugee population, their politicization seems very likely as the refugees are predominantly from one ethnic group and exile provided better opportunities for political activities than a country struck by civil war and ethnic discrimination.<sup>27</sup> In any case, it is clearly true that many if not most Burundian political movements and parties have their roots in exile. Among the first ones to be founded abroad were the « Parti Démocrate Hutu » (Pardehutu) in 1965 and the « Parti Populaire du Burundi » as well as the « Front Populaire Libération » after the 1972 events.<sup>28</sup> Palipehutu was even established in a

<sup>22</sup> NGAYIMPENDA, É., *op. cit.*, p. 44 and 83; ICG, “Réfugiés et Déplacés Burundais: Construire d’Urgence un Consensus sur le Rapatriement et la Réinstallation”, *Briefing Afrique*, Nairobi/Bruxelles, 2 December 2003, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> LEMARCHAND, R., “Patterns of State Collapse and Reconstruction in Central Africa: Reflections On The Crisis In The Great Lakes”, *African Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1997): available at <http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v1/3/2.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> LEMARCHAND, R., *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide*, Cambridge / New York / Melbourne, Woodrow Wilson Center Press & Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.20.

<sup>25</sup> MALKKI, L. H., *op. cit.*, p. 3ff.

<sup>26</sup> SOMMERS, M., “Representing Refugees: The Role of Elites in Burundi Refugee Society”, *Disasters*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1995, pp. 19-25, p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> At least in Burundi, there is no doubt for most local experts and elites that there were political activities in refugee camps. Some had direct or indirect insights, others merely assume this as a logical link.

<sup>28</sup> NIMUBONA, J., *op. cit.*, p. 220.

Tanzanian refugee camp in 1980 while activities were later coordinated from the headquarters in Belgium. Before the second larger wave of refugees in 1993, it was mainly Palipehutu along with the « Front pour la Libération Nationale » (Frolina) dominating political and military activities in exile. The latter movement was more successful among Imbo refugees coming from the stripe of land along Lake Tanganyika while Palipehutu had a stronger base among Banyaruguru refugees originating from the Burundian highland where they mainly lived from farming.<sup>29</sup>

With the abrupt end of the political transformation in Burundi, those who had to leave the country came to the conclusion that « fighting their way back in » seemed to be the only promising option, especially since the political process had finally proved to be in the hands of the Burundian military. In the 1990s, the newly founded « Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie » (FDD) was militarily active from Congolese territory where it was impossible to separate fighters from refugees in the camps. Generally, the violent conflicts in Rwanda, Burundi, the DRC and to a lesser degree Uganda are linked by refugee flows and military actors who extensively used Congolese territory « as bases for assault and retreat ».<sup>30</sup> The impact of Rwandan refugees who fled in the course of the 1959 Hutu Revolution on ethnic relations in their host country Burundi provided only the starting point for a regional conflict formation that reached a peak in intensity with the two Congo Wars. Here again Rwandan refugees played a decisive role. Security threats by members of the former Rwandan army (FAR) and of the Interahamwe militia who had fled and lived in camps along with hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees in Eastern Congo after the successful invasion of the « Rwandan Patriotic Front » (RPF) in 1994 served as the justification for the Rwandan intervention.

A similar phenomenon occurred in the case of the Burundian FDD which at first cooperated with the Rwandan ex-FAR and Interahamwe on Congolese territory. The mixture of refugees and rebels made the refugee camp in Uvira a military target finally leading to attacks of so called Banyamulenge in October 1996. In fact, many of them seemed to be regular troops of the Burundian and Rwandan armies<sup>31</sup>. One week after the first attack on the Uvira camp the « Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Zaïre » (AFDL) was created and subsequently involved in dismantling refugee camps as well. With the return of about 40,000 Burundians forced to leave the camps and 100,000 who moved deeper into the DRC the base of the FDD movement was significantly decimated.<sup>32</sup> Some sources stress that as a result of the worsening

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<sup>29</sup> SOMMERS, M., *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> REYNTJENS, F., "Briefing: The Second Congo War – More than a remake", *African Affairs*, 1999, Vol. 98, pp. 241-250, p. 242.

<sup>31</sup> The Burundian army has also been related to the massacre at a hospital in Uvira territory where Burundian Hutu rebels were treated, see TURNER, T., *The Congo Wars: Conflict, Myth and Reality*, London & New York, ZED Books, 2007, p. 91f.

<sup>32</sup> MURISON, J., "The Politics of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in the Congo War", in CLARK, J. F. (ed.), *The African Stakes of the Congo War*, New York & Basingstoke, Palgrave

conditions in the DRC many Burundians also fled to Tanzania including a significant number of rebels.<sup>33</sup> However, after the start of the Second Congo War in 1998, the FDD remained militarily active in the DRC, this time on Kabila's side. But simultaneously to the deterioration of the situation in the DRC, the position of the FDD strengthened in Tanzania where Frolina and Palipehutu had maintained small bases in Kigoma and Ngara districts. With the Buyoya coup the same year, the solidarity of the Tanzanian government for the rebellion and thus, the room to maneuver increased.<sup>34</sup>

But despite the fact that the « combatants on foreign soil » phenomenon has been acknowledged and directly addressed in the Burundian demobilization process<sup>35</sup> it is difficult to systematically assess how strongly political and military activities were linked to or based in refugee camps. Due to their official prohibition, such activities have been normally clandestine, and Tanzanian authorities, camp managers as well as international actors often tend to deny their existence. Concerning Burundian refugee camps in Tanzania, there certainly were rebel group activities such as recruitment and training, and there were cross-border attacks from Tanzanian territory. Rebels also entered camps to recover after battle. It is equally clear that several political movements or parties, most with military wings, were active in the camps.<sup>36</sup> But a mission of the International Crisis Group at the end of the 1990s revealed that « most of the more militant activities occur outside the domain of the camps ».<sup>37</sup> Rebels apparently operated from the bush and on the border to Burundi and by maintaining a low profile in the camps assured access to humanitarian aid. Thus, refugee camps did not directly function as military bases while the level of political activities and meetings was high.<sup>38</sup>

Studies and reports around the time of the Arusha and the cease-fire negotiations showed that many refugees raised demands equivalent or similar to those pursued by the Hutu rebel groups. While security considerations, the successful completion of negotiations and access to property and education were rather general preconditions mentioned by refugees for their return, other commonly named points reflected a political agenda. Among these were the liberation of political prisoners, the reform of the army and judiciary, the return of the constitutional order of 1993 and the supply of rebels by the international community until the enforcement of reforms.<sup>39</sup> These preferences are not very

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Macmillan, 2002, pp. 225-237, pp. 228f. Other sources say those staying in the DRC mainly went to Bukavu, see TURNER, T., *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>33</sup> ICG, "Burundian Refugees in Tanzania: The Key Factor to the Burundi Peace Process", *ICG Central Africa Report* no. 12, Nairobi, 30 November 1999, p. 6; TURNER, T., *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3ff. and 13.

<sup>35</sup> BOSHOFF, H., VREY, W., *A Case Study for Burundi – Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration during the transition in Burundi: A technical analysis*, ISS Monograph Series, No. 125, August 2006, p. 41.

<sup>36</sup> LISCHER, S. K., *op. cit.*, pp. 23 and 113.

<sup>37</sup> ICG, "Burundian Refugees in Tanzania", *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> LISCHER, S. K., *op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>39</sup> NIMUBONA, J., *op. cit.*, p. 231; ICG, "Réfugiés et Déplacés Burundais", *op. cit.*, pp. 4f.



surprising as the very reasons for the refugees' flight had been strongly linked to politicized ethnicity in Burundi. Overall, it surely seemed reasonable for the Hutu refugees to support the rebellion in one way or another in order to be able to return. If the extent of the militarization of Burundian camps is hard to estimate, there certainly has been a politicization process along the lines of Hutu rebel group agendas. Referring to the refugees' function as a recruitment and support base they might not have generated violent conflict, but have at least contributed to its persistence.

#### **4. RETURN AND REINTEGRATION: « HOMECOMING » IN TRANSITION**

The comprehensive repatriation of Burundian refugees did not start before 2001 when the Tripartite Commission comprising the Burundian and Tanzanian governments and the UNHCR was installed. But nearly all refugees who had been in Rwanda already returned at the time of the genocide in 1994 and another wave in 1997. Furthermore, those staying in the DRC – originally around 130,000 people – predominantly returned between November 1996 and December 1997 after the start of the First Congo War. This means that more than 90% of the Burundians in DRC and Rwanda respectively had returned by 1999 before the major repatriation process from Tanzania started.<sup>40</sup>

The official return process takes place under Protocol IV in the Arusha Peace Agreement of 2000. During the peace negotiations, the refugees (as other social groups) did not have their own representatives, though the facilitator of talks, President Nyerere, visited the Tanzanian camps and a delegation from the camps attended the June 1999 session of the negotiations. In addition, refugee leaders linked to armed groups rejected participation on apolitical grounds as it had been proposed.<sup>41</sup> In the course of negotiations, there was no controversy over the right to return for all refugees. This seems remarkable given the (presumed) political disposition of the refugees. However, those parties who could not expect direct advantages from repatriation in terms of support, most likely believed that comprehensive return would weaken the Hutu rebellion linked to refugee camps in Tanzania.<sup>42</sup> Since the « Conseil National pour la Défense de la Démocratie – Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie » (CNDD-FDD) did not participate in the Arusha process, this seemed to be a promising strategy. Overall, the prolonged exile of hundreds of thousands Burundians could not be in the interest of those included in the transition process.

The final version of the Arusha agreement clearly states that all Burundian refugees must be able to return. In addition, it has been laid down that their citizen rights and their property must be restored. For the purpose of

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<sup>40</sup> NGAYIMPENDA, É., *op. cit.*, pp. 15f.

<sup>41</sup> ICG, "Burundian Refugees in Tanzania", *op. cit.*, pp. 1 and 18.

<sup>42</sup> ICG, "Réfugiés et Déplacés Burundais", *op. cit.*, p. 1; and interview, Bujumbura, December 2007.

the latter a revision of Burundi's Land Act has been foreseen. If the recovery of property is not possible despite entitlement, returnees must receive compensation.<sup>43</sup> One specific feature of the document might also explain why the consensus on repatriation was so comprehensive: the principle of equity which was applied to return and reintegration of refugees and « sinistrés »<sup>44</sup> to prevent any discrimination. Thus, the ethnic interpretation of displacement did not become a source of discontent in this context. While with CNDD-FDD and the « Forces nationales de libération » (FNL) two important Hutu groups remained outside the settlement and thus, insecurity in Burundi prevailed the repatriation process nonetheless started in 2002.

#### 4.1 The course of repatriation

Since 2001, more than 430,000 refugees have returned from Tanzania to Burundi.<sup>45</sup> Though it is difficult to accurately assess spontaneous return, at least since 2002 three fourth of returns have been facilitated by the UNHCR with the quota of facilitation being higher in Eastern provinces of Burundi and lower in the Western part.<sup>46</sup> Overall, Makamba, Muyinga and Ruyigi are the three most important zones of return. While most refugees return to their place of origin, those without land and reference are settled in new villages<sup>47</sup> after a certain time in a temporary accommodation.<sup>48</sup>

While the Arusha agreement and even more so the cease-fire agreement of 2003 have been pull factors for return by improving the security situation and by triggering hopes for better living conditions, important push factors have been at work as well. First of all, there is increasing pressure from the Tanzanian government on all refugees on its territory to return. The Tanzanian police had started to enforce the legal provision to limit refugee movement within a four-kilometer radius around the Burundian camps in 2003. Refugees illegally caught are arrested and returned to the border. Furthermore, there are new restrictions on farming and other professional activities outside the camps.<sup>49</sup> The original intention of the Tanzanian government to close down

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<sup>43</sup> *Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi*, 28 August 2000, Protocol IV, Chapter 1.

<sup>44</sup> The term « sinistrés » includes all displaced, regrouped and dispersed persons as well as returnees.

<sup>45</sup> It is difficult to assess the return of Burundian elites in numbers. A census in March and April 2000 revealed that 2215 cadres and state agents were in exile awaiting socio-professional reintegration, see NGAYIMPENDA, É., *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>46</sup> UNHCR, *Burundi : Bulletin Réfugiés*, Bujumbura, n° 16, Sept.-Oct. 2007, p. 1; NGAYIMPENDA, É., *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> These are built by the government agency « Projet d'Appui au Rapatriement et à la Réintégration des Sinistrés » (PARESI) with the help of the UNCHR.

<sup>48</sup> UNHCR, *Burundi : Bulletin Réfugiés*, Bujumbura, n° 13, Feb.-March 2007, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL, *Burundian Refugees in Tanzania: Mounting Pressure to Return*, Bulletin 23/03/2004.

all camps with Burundian refugees by the end of 2007 has not proved realizable, but a new potential deadline is mid-2008.<sup>50</sup>

As the pace of refugee repatriation slowed down and the security situation improved, UNHCR has moved from facilitation to active promotion in July 2006.<sup>51</sup> Besides pressure in their host country, there are now new incentives for refugees to return, such as increased food rations for six months and a payment of 50,000 Burundian Francs for returnees from Tanzania introduced in 2007. Generally, returnees assisted by UNHCR receive a return package comprising food rations, kitchen utensils, seeds, blankets and other basic commodities and now the mentioned payment in addition.<sup>52</sup> Promotion has also been pursued by organizing « go and see » as well as « come and tell » visits to give refugees first-hand information about the situation in their home country. In the meantime, secondary education, vocational training and income generating activities are scaled down in the camps since 2007.<sup>53</sup>

Despite these attempts to speed up the repatriation process, it has actually slowed down significantly since the end of the transition. Overall, return has been highest in 2003 and 2004, closely followed by the election year 2005 while it clearly fell in 2006 and 2007. Last year only 40,000 people went back to Burundi.<sup>54</sup> Analyzing the reasons those about 120,000 persons currently remaining in Tanzanian camps might have for not returning, difficult socio-economic conditions in Burundi and the insecure security and political situation are most often named.<sup>55</sup> Besides occasional food insecurity in parts of Burundi and the difficulties with access to land education and health, the pending negotiations with the FNL clearly play a role, either because of the remaining uncertainty or – as has often been suggested – active efforts by the FNL to prevent the refugees in Tanzania from returning. Some refugees might also have unrealistic hopes of being resettled in a third country. Another reason for not returning that is occasionally mentioned is the assumed involvement of those staying in Tanzania in human rights violations in the course of the 1993 bloodshed.<sup>56</sup>

Until recently, the official repatriation process has basically been limited to refugees from 1993. UNHCR had rejected the facilitation of return of

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<sup>50</sup> IRIN NEWS / Translation by Burundi Réalités Agence Presse, *Burundi : des milliers de réfugiés attendent toujours leur rapatriement*, 12/04/2007.

<sup>51</sup> The promotion decision, however, was not comprehensive as the provinces of Bujumbura-Rural, Cibitoke and Bubanza were excluded due to the difficult security situation there.

<sup>52</sup> UNHCR, *Burundi : Bulletin Réfugiés*, Bujumbura, n° 16, Sept.-Oct. 2007, p. 1 and n° 15, July-August 2007, p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> Joint Communiqué of the 11th meeting of the Tripartite Commission on the Voluntary Repatriation of Burundian refugees living in Tanzania, Dar es Salaam, 4 June 2007, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> UNHCR, *Burundi Fact Sheet*, Bujumbura, 30 September 2007.

<sup>55</sup> CONSOLIDATED APPEALS PROCESS, *Burundi 2007: Mid-Year Review*, June 2007, p. 12, see also [www.humanitarianappeal.net](http://www.humanitarianappeal.net); Institut de Statistiques et d'Études Économiques du Burundi-ISTEEBU & PAM/UNHCR/Inter Agences, *Enquête d'Évaluation de la Réintégration Durable des Rapatriés Burundais, Résultats Définitifs*, Bujumbura, April 2007, p. 11.

<sup>56</sup> NGAYIMPENDA, É., *op. cit.*, p. 83; Interview, Bujumbura, October 2007.

the old caseload refugees stating that the conditions for their repatriation were not met.<sup>57</sup> However, spontaneous return of some 1972 refugees and a growing pressure to find a lasting solution for those remaining in the settlements in Tanzania, led to a study on the old caseload refugees presented at the 12th Tripartite Commission in December 2007. According to this investigation and registration among 1972 refugees only 21% of them wish to return to Burundi while nearly 80% prefer naturalization in Tanzania. This means not more than about 45,000 out of 218,000 plan to go back to Burundi, the others have been invited by the host government to apply for Tanzanian citizenship. The three settlements will be closed by authorities in cooperation with UNHCR meaning that naturalized refugees will be resettled in other parts of Tanzania.<sup>58</sup>

With the repatriation and resettlement of the 1972 refugees and the likely return of most remaining camp refugees, the Burundian refugee crisis will come to an end. However, the end of their status will certainly not mean the end of the refugee cycle for those who have chosen to go back to Burundi. The reintegration challenge required a comprehensive response from the Burundian government.<sup>59</sup> In February 2003 the « Commission Nationale de Réhabilitation des Sinistrés » (CNRS) was established and placed under the responsibility of the Ministry of Resettlement and Reinsertion of IDPs and Repatriates. The tutelage of the Ministry has often been criticized as a lack of autonomy and a sign of conflict between the two negotiating camps at Arusha – mainly the « Union pour le progrès national » (UPRONA) and FRODEBU – over the benefits of the repatriation process.<sup>60</sup> At least the commission was not able to coordinate all relevant activities and clearly concentrate the responsibility for reintegration under one roof. Finally, this arrangement has been abolished by the new government which led to the dissolution of the CNRS and the installation of a Directorate General for Repatriation, Resettlement and Reintegration of Displaced and Repatriated Persons at the new Ministry of National Solidarity, Human Rights and Gender in March 2006. Repeated restructuring of institutions and competences culminating in the sixth government reshuffle in November 2007 have certainly got in the way of pursuing a consistent reintegration strategy. Activities focus primarily on direct socio-economic needs and often depend on outside support. Many efforts in the field of refugee reintegration are undertaken by international organizations, donors and NGOs dealing with issues from rather technical assistance in fields like housing to activities for social reintegration and mediation. Though often

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<sup>57</sup> IRIN NEWS, *Burundi: Home is still home, even without land*, 16 August 2006.

<sup>58</sup> IRIN NEWS, *Burundi-Tanzania: New beginnings for the "1972 refugees"*, 12 March 2008.

<sup>59</sup> After UNHCR has provided refugees with their return package and transferred them to their home communities, it only follows up the process by a general monitoring. The responsibility for further provisions and reintegration lies with the Burundian government, though international organizations and donors provide support for respective programs.

<sup>60</sup> KAMUNGI, P. M., OKETCH, J. S., HUGGINS, C., *op. cit.*, p. 1ff.; NIMUBONA, J., *op. cit.*, p. 236; ICG, "Réfugiés et Déplacés Burundais", *cit.*, p. 2.

individually successful, these projects can hardly compensate for the structural difficulties underlying emerging reintegration problems.

#### 4.2 The social and socio-economic impact of refugee reintegration

According to the United Nations, the number of all « sinistrés » in Burundi today is about one million of which nearly one half are returnees.<sup>61</sup> Considering the total Burundian population of about 8.7 million<sup>62</sup>, this number indicates an enormous challenge. But according to a UNHCR-World Food Programme (WFP) Joint Assessment Mission (JAM) on the reintegration of former Burundian refugees, their immediate reintegration has overall been successful. Furthermore, no specific discrimination against returnees has been found.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, the status of a returnee seems to be surprisingly persistent. The same JAM has found that « regardless of the date of return, returnees continue to be known as/consider themselves to be, returnees ».<sup>64</sup> There can be several explanations for this.

Firstly, a refugee society develops increasingly different from the original society which means that after an exile period of years if not decades Burundian refugee society might be as separate from Burundian society as New York's Little Italy is separate from Italy, like Marc Sommers stated.<sup>65</sup> There are very apparent indicators for the different circumstances under which refugees have lived, for example it is well-known that returning refugees are often better off in terms of health and education compared to their fellow countrymen. Based on the experiences gained in exile, returnees also bring home new habits, skills and resources. Another, less clear factor might be a change in identity and social networks among refugees as it has been found by Malkki among Burundian refugees in Tanzania.

Secondly, social and political conditions in the home country have changed over time as well, thus, there is no such thing as a return to the status quo *ex ante* for refugees.<sup>66</sup> In cases of other return movements, a mismatch between imagined and experienced homecoming has been observed based on

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<sup>61</sup> UN, *Stratégie commune des Nations Unies pour la réinsertion des sinistrés au Burundi*, Bujumbura, August 2004, p. 2. As indicated by the total number of « sinistrés », reintegration is not a process concerning refugees alone. However, in this article the term « returnee » only refers to former refugees in accordance with the definition of the JAM.

<sup>62</sup> CIA, "Burundi", in *The World Factbook*, update 15 May 2008, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/by.html#People>.

<sup>63</sup> UNHCR-WFP, *Joint Assessment Mission of Burundian Returnees*, Burundi, 07-11 May 2007, p. 9.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> SOMMERS, M., *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>66</sup> ESSED, P., FRERKS, G., SCHRIJVERS, J., "Introduction: Refugees, Agency and Social Transformation", in ESSED, P., FRERKS, G., SCHRIJVERS, J. (eds.), *Refugees and the Transformation of Societies: Agency, Policies, Ethics and Politics*, New York & Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2004, pp. 1-16, p. 5.

social differences and their perception by returnees and residents.<sup>67</sup> All factors outlined above have at times been identified among Burundian refugees and there is no reason to believe that they do not play a wider role.

Thirdly, there might be influences which increase social distance between returnees and others directly linked to elements of the return process itself. On the one hand, returnees might think that they do not receive what they deserve or what they have been promised by actors involved in their repatriation. In the case of Burundi, there have been several difficulties during the official repatriation process. The promise of the government of three months free health services to refugees and two years free secondary education following return has not been kept because health centers and schools have difficulties to recover the costs. Therefore returnees often do not receive free care and education as officially announced. In a similar manner, the Communal Reception Committees do not function, most likely because members are volunteers and receive no compensation for their engagement.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, the JAM report points out that returnees often feel disadvantaged when beneficiaries of assistance are selected.<sup>69</sup> Many local experts share the assessment that due to an inadequate reception system, returnees are very much left to themselves.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, where returnees receive special benefits and support from international donors or the Burundian government, residents and other groups like IDPs can feel discriminated and demand their share, especially since all these groups often share the same difficult socio-economic situation.

Overall, these sources of discontent seem to be relatively negligible compared to one question extensively mentioned as explosive in the context of massive refugee return: the land issue. The mostly negative consequences of environmental scarcity especially shortage of fertile land have long been pointed out by academic studies focusing on different world regions.<sup>71</sup> There can be no doubt about the scarcity of land in Burundi where 90% of the population including refugees and IDPs are dependent on the exploitation of land while population density on arable land is extremely high. By 2004 the average family had less than one hectare of land while having at least five children.<sup>72</sup> What exacerbates the problem is that land has become less and less

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<sup>67</sup> For an example see: STEFANSSON, A. H., "Homecomings to the Future: From Diasporic Mythographies to Social Projects of Return", in MARKOWITZ, F., STEFANSSON, A. H. (eds.), *Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2004, pp. 2-20.

<sup>68</sup> UNHCR-WFP, *op. cit.*, pp. 8 and 19.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> Interviews, Bujumbura, November – December 2007.

<sup>71</sup> See for example: HOMER-DIXON, T. F., "Environmental Scarcities and Violent Conflict: Evidence from Cases", *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Summer, 1994, pp. 5-40.

<sup>72</sup> REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL, *Burundi: Large-Scale Repatriation Would Threaten Peace*, Bulletin 12/04/2004.

fertile due to overexploitation, and the best land has been demanded by the political-military establishment in the past.<sup>73</sup>

Though this indicates that the underlying problem is structural, the refugee return is specifically linked to the land issue. Especially those who fled in 1972 have difficulties to recover their land. It was predominantly located in the communes of Rumonge (Bururi province) and Nyanza-lac (Makamba province) and has often been confiscated by the government. Either the land was occupied by the state, has been disposed by administrative authorities normally to officials, has been occupied spontaneously by somebody without administrative intervention, or there was fraudulent sale of land by family members of the refugee. Sometimes refugees have also sold their land before exile or by delegation during exile.<sup>74</sup> The peculiar problem for the old caseload refugees is that many of the current occupants hold land titles. Furthermore, the 1986 Burundian Land Code determines that someone who acquires a plot of land and holds it for 30 years acquires the right of reallocation.<sup>75</sup>

But the problem of access to land is not limited to the 1972 refugees. Even though they have most often not been victims of institutionalized deprivation of land, many 1993 refugee find their land occupied upon return. Up to 90% of problems experienced by returnees are supposed to be land-related.<sup>76</sup> Even if many of these original difficulties are resolved by local mediation, the general problem remains significant. Several sources indicate that « only » about 15% of returnees have land conflicts or no access to land.<sup>77</sup> This would still comprise a group of more than 70,000 people. For those who have permanently no access to land, the government has tried to identify available land in a nation-wide study. Free cultivable land finally amounted to 141,266 hectares in the report. However, there are serious doubts regarding the reliability of this number as some land might be under customary use and the criteria for identifying sites differed from commune to commune.<sup>78</sup> Under these difficult circumstances it seems questionable if the recently established land commission, the « Commission Terre et Autres Biens » (CNTB), will be able to significantly diminish the problem. In any case, its competency is confined to review complaints and help landless owners (not only returnees) to recover their land in single cases.<sup>79</sup> Besides the overload with thousands of

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<sup>73</sup> Observatoire de l'Action Gouvernementale/OAG, "La protection et la défense des droits fonciers des déplacés et des réfugiés: Pour la justice, la réconciliation et la paix", *Document de plaidoyer*, Bujumbura, November 2006, p. 7; UNHCR-WFP, *op. cit.*, p. 5; ICG, "Réfugiés et Déplacés au Burundi", *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> OAG, *op. cit.*, pp. 12 and 17; KAMUNGI, P. M., OKETCH, J. S., HUGGINS, C., *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>75</sup> Generally, land in Burundi belongs to the government.

<sup>76</sup> KAMUNGI, P. M., OKETCH, J. S., HUGGINS, C., *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> RÉPUBLIQUE DE BURUNDI, *Étude sur la Problématique Foncière Face aux Défis de la Réintégration et Réinsertion des Sinistrés au Burundi*, Rapport d'Enquête Provisoire de Francine Umwari/PEM Consult, Bujumbura, Oct. 2007, p. 18; UNHCR-WFP, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> NGAYIMPENDA, É., *op. cit.*, p. 78; KAMUNGI, P. M., OKETCH, J. S., HUGGINS, C., *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> IRIN NEWS, *op. cit.*

unresolved land disputes, the Commission has not been assigned dealing with structural aspects of the land problem.

There are regular reports on instances of land conflicts between returnees and residents turning violent, often accompanied by accusations of sorcery and fetishism.<sup>80</sup> Many experts believe that if there is to be another destabilization in Burundi, it will be strongly linked to the problem of land conflicts. Even though these disputes are not confined to returning refugees, their significant number might well be the last straw and intensify tensions. The repercussions of the demonstrations of expropriated Tutsi families to demand new land in exchange for what they had to give back to returnees in October 1993 should serve as a warning in this regard. Among all difficulties with the reintegration of refugees, the land problem clearly stands out. In this context, however, other social and socio-economic problems might add up and further complicate reinsertion.

#### **4.3 Can there be a politicization of reintegration?**

Many observers attributed a big potential for destabilization to the Burundian repatriation process amongst other things because disappointed returnees could provide a pool for mobilization by rebels or political movements. Though social and socio-economic problems have emerged and the reintegration process has been far from ideal, this has not culminated in a severe crisis, yet. Surely, a crisis in humanitarian terms could easily arise if current structural deficiencies are not resolved and the overall economic situation worsens. However, for a crisis with the potential of a wider destabilization, reintegration problems would have to be politically exploited. While the refugee issue has always been political to a certain degree, a politicization of the reintegration process would yet have to materialize. And for local conflicts around land to spill-over to the national level, the issue would have to become instrumentalized.

There currently seem to be three thinkable starting points for such a political exploitation. Firstly, the ethnic component of displacement could provide the basis for renewed confrontation. Occasionally there have been quarrels over how to handle the issue and especially the institutional set-up which could be interpreted in this direction. The struggle around the installation of the CNRS has been seen as a sign of discontent between the two negotiating camps at Arusha. Certainly there was a conflict of interest around the financial and political benefits of the repatriation and reintegration process. Leaving the institutional level, an ethnic component could also come into play if interests of IDPs clash with those of returnees. For example, IDPs strongly link the return to their original community to the demand of ending impunity<sup>81</sup>, while the current government seems hesitant on this point. But altogether, this point is

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<sup>80</sup> NGAYIMPENDA, É., *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>81</sup> OAG, *op. cit.*, p. 47.



rather a general problem of reconciliation and transitional justice. These challenges have not been comprehensively approached in Burundi until now and remain explosive. They are linked to the refugee reintegration issue, but it seems rather unlikely that this will be the overriding framework for potential future confrontations. Conversely, intensified efforts in the field of reconciliation would clearly help reintegration of all « sinistrés ».

However, conflict could start again around the issue of land, not only because it is especially pressing with regular local conflicts, but it is also a political issue in itself. This is due to the occupation or illegal sale after the crisis in 1972 and sometimes in 1993 and thus, the involvement of certain parts of the political establishment.<sup>82</sup> Especially the potential return of nearly 200,000 old caseload refugees from Tanzania has spread fear in the Southern provinces. Against this background, the fact that only a fifth of these people actually plan to return will certainly lower the risk of intense confrontations which could spill over to the political level. In addition, insights on a wider scale have shown that environmental scarcity most likely leads to low-level violence or sub-national conflicts of a persistent, but rather diffuse nature which means they normally do not lead to larger armed conflicts.<sup>83</sup> However, in the Burundian context of severe armed conflict in the past, extreme poverty and a strong dependency of huge parts of the population on land, the possibility that land conflicts are exploited politically and spill-over to the national level remains.

Secondly, beyond the conflict lines of the civil war, recent developments have shown that new factions have turned up on both sides of the ethnic cleavage – mainly on the Hutu side – generating a « confusion of categories ».<sup>84</sup> Thus, a political instrumentalization of the refugee reintegration issue could well take place among movements or parties originally linked to the Hutu community. Here the (perceived) politicization of refugees in exile could play an important role. There is the common assumption that because of its strong support among refugees the CNDD-FDD pushed for their quick repatriation before the 2005 elections to increase its chances to win.<sup>85</sup> This claim corresponds with the return numbers. However, even if many refugees tended towards the party of Pierre Nkurunziza and their vote might have had an influence, in the light of a lack of data on this link, there remains at least the common perception that the CNDD-FDD profited from repatriation during the transition.

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<sup>82</sup> NIMUBONA, J., *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>83</sup> Small- and large-N studies both found this relation with lower-level conflict. See HOMER-DIXON, T. F., *op. cit.*, p. 6 and HAUGE, W., ELLINGSEN T., “Beyond Environmental Scarcity: Causal Pathways to Conflict”, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Special Issue on Environmental Conflict, May 1998, pp. 299-317, p. 314.

<sup>84</sup> TURNER, S., “The Precarious Position of Politics in Popular Imagination: The Burundian Case”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2007, pp. 93-106, p. 103.

<sup>85</sup> REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL, *op. cit.*

A similar perception of politicization prevails with regard to those who currently remain in exile and are repeatedly linked to the FNL seeing them as a dead pledge for the next elections. This potential support base of the FNL is estimated at 350,000 persons including not only the 1993 refugees remaining in Tanzania, but those from 1972. Indeed, the FNL might prefer a settlement close to elections in 2010 in hoping « to copy the CNDD-FDD's success in 2005 »<sup>86</sup> which was supposedly facilitated by the support from returnees and by having enough barely demobilized combatants on the ground. Since the positioning for the elections is likely to start in the course of this year (if it has not already started), refugees and returnees could be seen once again as a valuable mobilization source. Their support has been assessed as important in the past and different movements and parties could once again compete for their backing.

On another, third level, the return and reintegration issue is already politicized to a certain degree. These processes do not only take place on the local, but also on the elite level. Many exiled politicians have returned and taken up administrative or political positions. Among the regular population, there is some suspicion towards these returning elites questioning their real motives and personal integrity.<sup>87</sup> Within elite circles, the return of parts of the Burundian Diaspora has led to an increased competition over positions and decision-making processes of different parties and institutions.<sup>88</sup> These conflicts of interest can develop into political conflicts, especially if an inclusion of the last remaining rebel movement, the FNL, into the political process brings in a new wave of returning elites and intensifies the struggle for positions.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Against great odds, the return and the short-term reintegration of Burundian refugees during and after the transition has worked relatively well. In the light of the extent and features of the Burundian refugee crisis, the repatriation of nearly half a million refugees is clearly a hopeful sign. Returnees' living conditions normally become similar to those of resident neighbors within a couple of months, and expert assessments as well as selective statements by returnees indicate that overall they are well received by their home communities.<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, the difficulties with access to land, housing, education and health show that structural problems are unresolved and thus, exacerbated by the process of repatriation. In addition, the social status of a « returnee » is not easily abandoned. Below the surface, social differences and reservations prevail and together with existing socio-economic problems –

<sup>86</sup> ICG, "Burundi: Finalising Peace with the FNL", *Africa Report* No. 131, 28 August 2007, p. 11.

<sup>87</sup> TURNER, S., *op. cit.*, pp. 94 and 97f.

<sup>88</sup> Interviews, Bujumbura, November-December 2007.

<sup>89</sup> Interviews, Bujumbura and Gitega, November-December 2007.

mainly the land issue – can well build the bases for renewed crisis. However, for reintegration problems to have wider destabilizing effects, they would have to be politically exploited, for example in the run-up to the next elections in 2010. There are three potential starting points for such an instrumentalization: the ethnic background of displacement, refugee politicization in exile and the intensification of the struggle for political positions. These provide the background against which political actors might decide to take up the reintegration issue in a polemic way. Compared to other questions the potential of the refugee reintegration issue turning into a politically relevant crisis is certainly rather low. But as long as structural problems and political uncertainty prevail, the existing difficulties in the field of long-term reintegration remain sources for manipulation and unrest.

Zurich, March 2008