

# Refugees International

## **Burundi's Day of Transition: Perspectives from those who will benefit most from peace**

**05/02/2003** - In refugee camps in Western Tanzania, the current home of more than 350,000 refugees from Burundi, news, like food, is a precious commodity. In Mtendeli Camp in Kibondo District, refugees gather each day at the Information Center at 1:30 pm precisely to listen to the daily radio broadcast of news from their home.

Refugees International, currently on an assessment mission in Tanzania, spoke with some of the refugees about the importance of the transition date. Many watched the UN-guided Burundi Transitional Government change hands in Bujumbura on April 30, 2003, an historic change from a Tutsi to a Hutu President. The refugees, some in Tanzania for a decade, who had fled and are still fleeing sporadic and unpredictable violence in Burundi, are currently under tremendous pressure to return. They seem to have the most to lose during this time, but perhaps since they have already lost everything, they laughed as they answered our queries about what May 1 meant to them. "May 1 is a joke," one young man told RI, a comment that sums up how many refugees are feeling.

"May 1 means nothing," another told us, "because the new President will not have an army. The national army is the key, it needs to be changed." Jean-Baptiste, a refugee representative to the Arusha Peace Process, a former teacher and now a community leader in Mtabila Camp, went on to say, "I can't go back unless the [Tutsi-dominated] army is integrated."

Tanzanian authorities are eager for this population to return home. The Deputy Minister of Home Affairs, in charge of refugees in Tanzania, commenting on the likelihood of a successful transition, told RI, "We hope the repatriation process will be quick. The main fear of the Burundian refugees is the army. So we think more refugees may not go back if the arrangement stays as is. Integration of the army is one of the important factors of the Arusha Accord. We hope this will be the most important factor to convince refugees to go back."

UNHCR remains watchful that the return process be voluntary. Last year a repatriation effort to Burundi was facilitated but not encouraged by UNHCR; now returns have virtually ceased. In fact, the movement of Burundians is greater into Tanzania as they seek refuge from the violence in Burundi. "There is a difference between refugees registering and really going," RI was told by a UNHCR official,

"The major condition is the reintegration of the army. Refugees said, 'We won't go back,' unless that happens."

UNHCR currently is unable to organize cross-border visits due to the insecurity in the area. UN vehicles are unable to travel on the roads the refugees are expected to use to return. Refugees who had just arrived from Burundi, looking wan and thin,

told RI of armed groups' harassment and abuse. "We need to do cross border visits so refugees can see areas themselves," the UNHCR official told RI.

Burundi wants the refugees to come home. Tanzania wants the refugees to go home. The international community wants the refugees to go home. The refugees want to go home. But due to the political and security situation in Burundi everyone is in a holding pattern.

Back at one of the five Information Centers in the five Burundian Camps in Kibondo, Paul told us, "The only way for peace is a review of army and justice institutions. They need to change before I can go home. On May 1, power will change, but that won't affect me, because nothing will really change. The problem is protection. If I don't have it, I can't live."

The news broadcasts will continue to be listened to attentively. The decision to go home will be made hopefully in dignity. And when it is safe.

RI Board members Trish Malloch Brown and Eileen Shields-West are conducting a visit to the Congolese and Burundian camps in Western Tanzania, accompanied by Anne Edgerton, advocate, and Antonia Blackwood, Development Associate.