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Burundian Refugees Face a Deadline to Leave Tanzania

(Kampala, 17 September 2009) Less than two weeks from the date of the announced closure of Tanzania's last refugee camp for Burundians, the Centre for the Study of Forced Migration and the International Refugee Rights Initiative are launching a report, "**I Don't Know Where to Go': Burundian Refugees in Tanzania Under Pressure to Leave**".

The paper, based on a two-week mission conducted in Tanzania in August 2009 and building on previous research ("**Going Home or Staying Home? Ending Displacement for Burundian Refugees in Tanzania**"), outlines serious concerns regarding the protection of refugees in the country: once the camp is closed, approximately 30,000 refugees will be effectively homeless. Pressure to repatriate combined with a clear reticence on the part of refugees to return, calls into question the voluntary nature of the exercise. Meanwhile the outcome of a special scheme to offer naturalisation to a specific group of Burundian refugees – those who fled in 1972 – remains unclear.

Therefore the paper seeks to address two questions: why are refugees reluctant to return? And how can a fair policy be constructed which balances legitimate concerns of the Tanzanian government with the needs of Burundi's transition and applicable human rights frameworks?

Although many refugees want to go home, they are reluctant to return at this time. There are a number of reasons for this, most dominantly the impact of stories that have filtered through of the dire circumstances in which many returnees in Burundi have found themselves. In the words of one refugee, "those of 1972 who have gone back were told that there are peace villages, but these villages are not there." Others were born and have lived their entire lives in Tanzania, making accessing family land or other community support in Burundi difficult. "I didn't repatriate because I don't know where to go. I was born in Tanzania and I do not know Burundi," said another refugee. Others cited personal security concerns related to crimes they had experienced or witnessed.

For those who are unwilling to return, workable solutions must be found. Any aggressive pursuit of repatriation is likely to not only undermine the protection of refugees, but also to have a suboptimal geopolitical outcome in the long term. "Despite progress in establishing peace in Burundi, the government is clearly having considerable trouble effectively reintegrating returnees," said Dismas Nkunda, Co-Director of the International Refugee Rights Initiative, "pushing for return in conditions where basic needs cannot be met undermines not only the rights of returnees, but Burundi's transition as a whole." In this context, the report argues that both the timing of the current push for repatriation, as well as the possibility of alternatives to repatriation, need to be explored expediently.

The full paper is available at <http://www.refugee-rights.org/Publications/Papers/2009/I%20Dont%20Know%20Where%20to%20Go.091709.pdf>