

“I Fled Because I was Afraid to Die”
New IRRI report on the causes of exile of Burundian asylum seekers

(Kampala, 23 August 2017) International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI) today published a new [report](#) about the causes of exile of Burundian asylum-seekers. The research shows that Burundians continue to leave their country because of the ongoing threats and abuses by members of the *Imbonerakure* and the killings and enforced disappearances of their family members.

The testimonies, collected from Burundians that arrived in Uganda between March and June 2017, challenge the Burundian government’s [official narrative](#), which urges refugees to “return to their homeland, because peace and security prevail on the whole national territory”. While some are returning to Burundi and there is less open violence, new arrivals in neighbouring countries significantly outnumber the returnees, and all Burundians interviewed for this report said they did not intend to return in the near future. Some came to Uganda, because of the difficult situation for Burundian refugees in Tanzania.

“Refugees told horrible stories of rape, torture and killings by Imbonerakure and Burundian security services, especially targeting opposition members, but also ordinary citizens”, said Thijs Van Laer, programme manager at IRRI. *“If the Burundian authorities are serious about promoting the return of refugees, they must reign in the Imbonerakure and ensure accountability for abuses committed since the beginning of the political crisis, including through cooperation with international efforts.”*

Since the political crisis erupted in April 2015, accompanied by serious violence and repression, almost 420,000 Burundians have left their country. In June 2017, IRRI interviewed 30 who had recently arrived in Uganda. They described how they were severely tortured in detention, how their family members were brutally killed or how they continued to suffer because of the fate of family members arrested by the *Imbonerakure*, a militia affiliated to the ruling party. Five, including one man, said they had been gang raped. For a small minority, economic motives also played a role in the decision to leave Burundi, but always in combination with other reasons.

Burundians in Uganda who came from Tanzania complained about limited legal and physical protection, the difficult humanitarian situation and strained relations with host communities and Tanzanian authorities. President Magufuli of Tanzania recently announced the suspension of registration and naturalisation of Burundian refugees and has also called on them to return to Burundi. While the situation in Uganda appears better, some refugees had concerns regarding protection issues, insufficient non-food items and difficulties in accessing to specialised medical care.

The majority of the refugees IRRI spoke to, mentioned three conditions that would need to be in place before they would consider returning: the dismantlement of the *Imbonerakure* militia, political change and accountability for abuses, especially those committed since April 2015. Most, however, did not believe such conditions would be met any time soon, if at all, and cited the cyclical nature of conflict in Burundi as a greater impediment for their return. In addition, most did not seem to consider the regionally-mediated political dialogue as a solution to the crisis.

Regional actors must press the authorities to restore safety for all citizens and fundamental freedoms, and should adopt mechanisms to protect Burundian citizens and ensure accountability,” Van Laer said. *“As long as this is not the case, they should continue to offer Burundians a safe and dignified life outside of their country, without pressuring them to return.”*

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Notes to Editors:

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- A French language version of this report will be published and distributed in shortly.

- This report builds on research conducted in 2016, in Uganda, Burundi and Tanzania, as well as previous IRRI research, dating back to 2008. For IRRI's recent reports about Burundi:
 - o Burundi: a country on the edge, [briefing paper](#), April 2016
 - o I know the consequences of war, Understanding the dynamics of displacement in Burundi, [research report](#), December 2016