



PRESS RELEASE
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“They don’t even understand why we fled” New IRRI report highlights the difficulties of reintegration in Burundi

“Unfortunately, it is difficult to meet our needs. I did not receive any support, when we just came back from exile. [...] The major problem we face is feeding our families. Even the members of my family who welcomed us are exhausted.”¹ This woman and thousands like her who have repatriated to Burundi are urgently in need of support to re-establish livelihoods and reintegrate into their communities.

Based on interviews with returnees in Burundi, the report, entitled *“They don’t even understand why we fled’: the difficult path to reintegration in Burundi”*, describes the daily struggle of recently returned refugees from Tanzania to provide for their families. Most rely on the help of neighbours or local authorities, but this solidarity will be further strained as larger numbers are likely to return ahead of the upcoming electoral process.

“To break the cycle of conflict and displacement in Burundi, the government and international actors have to recognise that repatriation is a complex, long-term process that must be adequately supported”, Lucy Hovil, senior researcher at IRRI, said. “Humanitarian and development support must recognise the needs of both returnees and the communities to which they are returning, and address the underlying tensions that contributed to displacement in the first place.”

Hundreds of thousands of Burundians fled to neighbouring countries around the contested 2015 elections, marked by political unrest and violent repression. The majority fled to Tanzania, where they are now under pressure to return, with the governments of Burundi and Tanzania confirming plans to return 116,000 refugees by the end of 2019. These refugees are now left with two options: return home amidst ongoing socio-economic hardships and rights violations, or remain in chronically under-resourced camps. Returnees told IRRI they were forced home by the dire humanitarian situation in the camps and abuses against refugees venturing outside the camps.

While most continue to resist this undue pressure, others have signed up to return. Because of insufficient funding, however, the repatriation process is painfully slow and some have used the little money they had to return on their own. Even those assisted by UNHCR receive little, only free transport over the border and a return package that does not even last the three months it is expected to cover.

As a result, most of those interviewed were in a highly precarious situation. Their return packages have run out, and there is little other support. Given that many who fled were already amongst the most vulnerable, their struggles on return have only increased. Many of those we interviewed were landless, and previously unresolved land disputes continue to cast a long shadow.

While there has been considerable solidarity, some of those who did not go into exile resent the assistance, however paltry, returnees have received – even though they are equally vulnerable. Some returnees complained that they have been accused of supporting the opposition. Some had been threatened– or even physically abused – by the notorious *Imbonerakure* militia.

With elections due to take place next year, some are fearful of the future. Although there is outward calm, the government has restricted political space and refuses to engage in a regional dialogue with the opposition. “In a context in which repatriation is being pushed globally as the most desirable – and often, in practice, the only – ‘durable solution’, it is vital that the international community at the very least make

¹ Interview with returnee woman, November 2018, Makamba province, Burundi.



sure that repatriation is not only voluntary, but is sufficiently supported to promote effective reintegration.”

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Notes to Editors:

International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI) has been working more than a decade on return processes from Tanzania to Burundi, on the Burundian refugee situation, and on the rights situation in Burundi. For more resources, see <http://refugee-rights.org/regions/great-lakes-region/burundi>

IRRI was founded in 2004 to inform and improve responses to the cycles of violence and displacement that are at the heart of large-scale human rights violations. Over the last 14 years, we have developed a holistic approach to the protection of human rights before, during, and in the aftermath of displacement, by: identifying the violations that cause displacement and exile, protecting the rights of those who are displaced, and ensuring the solutions to their displacement are durable, rights respecting, safe and timely.

We work to ensure the voices of the displaced and conflict affected communities are not only heard but heeded at the international level through our evidence-based advocacy that is built on solid field-based research and analysis.

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