Introduction

This paper covers the conflict in Burundi, in particular the post-1993 crisis sparked off by the assassination of the first democratically elected Hutu President, Melchior Ndadaye. Included is an account of the negotiations leading to the Arusha Peace Accord in 2000. Events after 2000 in Burundi reveal the challenges to the peace agreement, especially the difficulties in securing a ceasefire with the rebel groups excluded from the negotiations. Violence intensified after the handover of presidential power from (Tutsi) Pierre Buyoya to (Hutu) Domitien Ndayizeye on 1 May 2003 in accordance with the terms of the Arusha Accord, further terrorising a weary and economically devastated civilian population.

The eruption of violence in Bujumbura in July 2003 is covered, as well as a summary of subsequent events, most importantly the inclusion of the largest rebel faction Conseil National pour la Défense de la Démocratie-Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie (CNDD-FDD) in the restructured army and government of Burundi in late 2003. Also noted is the recent agreement by the Forces Nationales de Libération (FNL), the only rebel group remaining outside of any peace or ceasefire agreement, to meet President Ndayizeye in January 2004.

The briefing outlines the devastating economic consequences of the conflict for the civilian population, and the implications for development. It notes the critical imperative of the disbursement of aid that has been pledged for the post-war economic reconstruction of the country, as this is the fulcrum for stability and sustainable peace in Burundi.

Background to the Conflict

The complexities of the Burundian conflict defy easy description and simplification. Moreover, events change rapidly and comments might be overtaken by the time of publication. The ongoing violence after 10 years of civil war which has claimed, by some estimates, as many as 350 000 lives, has been punctuated by numerous attempts at peace, ceasefires and broken agreements. Furthermore, the protracted nature of the conflict and the attendant ethnic divisions that it exacerbates must be understood in the context of the Great Lakes region as a whole. The potentially incendiary ethnic dimension to the Burundian crisis closely mirrors that in Rwanda, which blew up so tragically in 1994.

Burundi was an established kingdom prior to colonisation by Germany and later Belgium. An existing hierarchy therefore predates the colonial period, and so while the identities of Hutu and Tutsi were manipulated and entrenched during the colonial period, these identities cannot be dismissed as merely artificial products of that period (Reyntjens 1995:7-9).

This was to form the problematic political backdrop at the time of independence in 1962. In the first elections, Prince Rwagasore, the son of King Mwambutsa, became Prime Minister as leader of Union Pour le Progres National (UPRONA). Rwagasore was assassinated a month later, and the monarch called new elections that were overwhelmingly won by Hutu candidates. Mwambutsa, however, appointed a Tutsi prime minister, provoking an attempted coup by Hutu army officers. This was in turn suppressed by troops under (Tutsi) Captain Michel Micombero, and was
followed by a purge of Hutus from the army and political positions. Micombero was to go on to depose the next King of Burundi, Ntare V, and declare himself President, Prime Minister, Minister of Defence, and leader of UPRONA in November 1962 (Esterhuysen 1998:101-103).

The decade that followed was exemplified by violence on both sides of the ethnic divide, although the imbalance in power (with the army dominated by Tutsi) was inevitably to the Hutus’ disadvantage. This culminated in the 1972 massacres of up to 200,000 Hutu, with a further 150,000 fleeing to neighbouring states, in particular Tanzania. Many of them remain there to this day, straining relations between the two countries. Micombero was himself deposed in a coup in 1976 by Colonel Jean Baptiste Bagaza. In 1987, while Bagaza was out of the country, there was another coup led this time by Major Pierre Buyoya. By the following year the violence in the country had intensified, although a repeat of the brutal army suppression of 1972 was prevented as a result of a stronger international response. Buyoya, bowing to external pressure, attempted political reforms. These led to the drafting of a new constitution, and elections in 1993 (Reyntjens 1995:10).

The elections were again dominated by the majority Hutu candidates, who rallied behind a new party, Front pour la Democratie au Burundi (FRODEBU), as the main opposition to the mainly Tutsi UPRONA. The new President, Melchior Ndadaye, a moderate Hutu, was able to mobilise the population across the political spectrum, including followers of the outlawed, radical Parti pour la Libération du Peuple Hutu (PALIPEHUTU). A government of national unity incorporated representatives from both ethnic groups, but while political power had been transferred, the army remained dominated by Tutsi officers who resented the changes. As in the past, assassination and military coup were soon to follow.

1993: The ‘Creeping Coup’ and Civil War

On 21 October 1993 a small group of Tutsi officers attacked the presidential palace in Bujumbura, assassinating Ndadaye as well as high officials of FRODEBU, including the Speaker and Deputy Speaker of Parliament. The coup, however, lacked decisive leadership and had the support of neither the army nor of the Burundian population. The death of Ndadaye unleashed a wave of revenge attacks against the Tutsi, which in turn provoked a violent backlash from the army. This allowed for an illicit and unconstitutional seizure of power by Tutsi elements with the complicity of the military, which became known as the ‘creeping coup’. What followed was the further ethnic polarisation of the Burundian population and unchecked violence on all sides (Bullington 1997). It was in this climate that the armed Hutu rebel movements gained momentum.

In 1995, with the crisis in Burundi deteriorating, the United Nations passed Resolution 1012, mandating an international commission of enquiry to make recommendations on intervention. The violence in Burundi escalated further, prompting a February 1996 UN warning of ‘full scale war and genocide’. The Burundian army, however, rejected the possibility of outside intervention, and declared itself ready to oppose any foreign peacekeepers.

Meanwhile, efforts were made to begin a political peace process. Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, selected to mediate in the crisis, called a summit on Burundi in Arusha in June 1996. However, the army again assumed control in July 1996 and restored Buyoya as President. This resulted in an embargo against Burundi, reportedly supported by Nyerere (Mthembu-Salter 2002:27-28). Between 1997 and 1998 the Arusha talks faltered, and in 1999, when Nyerere died, they became deadlocked.
2000-3: The Arusha Peace Accord and Subsequent Agreements

Under Nelson Mandela, who succeeded Nyerere as mediator, the pace of the negotiations accelerated (Mthembu-Salter 2002:31). Most significantly, Mandela insisted that the armed rebel groups be included. He secured verbal assurances from the leaders of the FNL and FDD that they were prepared to negotiate. Mandela also used his status and reputation to generate international support for the peace process (Van Eck 2000).

Using external pressure, cajoling and sometimes threatening, Mandela insisted that the Arusha Peace Accord be signed on 28 August 2000. All 19 political parties present eventually signed. A problem with the agreement, however, was its lack of inclusiveness: the FNL and FDD, the two main armed Hutu rebel groups, were not parties to it, and some of the 19 parties felt that Mandela had bullied them into signing, which compromised their commitment and weakened the accord’s long-term prospects.

In terms of the Arusha Accord, an interim power-sharing government would take power in Burundi for two consecutive periods of 18 months each. The first period, which expired on 1 May 2003, was to be led by a Tutsi (Buyoya was the consensus candidate) who handed over power to a Hutu (Domitien Ndayizeye) for the remaining period. This interim power-sharing period is to culminate in an election in November 2004. In the run-up to the transfer of power on 1 May 2003, there were rumblings of dissatisfaction on both sides, as few of the other terms of the Accord – most importantly the integration of the army – had taken place.

Furthermore, while three of the main rebel groups – Pierre Nkurunziza’s internal wing of the CNDD-FDD, Jean-Bosco Ndaye-kengurukiye’s wing of the CNDD-FDD and Alain Mugabarabona’s wing of the FNL – had agreed to a ceasefire in December 2002, the violence in Burundi during this period increased. The wing of the FNL under Agathon Rwasa refused to be a party to the ceasefire, and in July 2003 it unleashed a sustained assault on Bujumbura, fuelling fears that Burundi could slide back into all-out civil war. Rwasa’s FNL has also spurned the efforts of the mediating team, now under the leadership of South African Deputy President Jacob Zuma, to bring them to the negotiating table, and so they remain outside of any peace or ceasefire agreement.

However, the FNL announced on 6 January 2004 that it was prepared to meet President Ndayizeye and hold its first talks with him at an undisclosed destination outside Burundi. This marks an about-turn for the FNL, as it has previously maintained that it will negotiate only with the Tutsi, who control the army, and has no wish to meet with Ndayizeye. There is some speculation as to the motive for the FNL’s sudden change of heart. Ndayizeye accused the FNL of having been behind the assassination of Michael Courtney, the Papal Nuncio in Burundi, on 29 December 2003, and this may therefore be a gesture of goodwill in order to maintain external support. Other recent events such as the inclusion of the Nkurunziza’s CNDD in prominent positions in the army and the transitional government may have tipped the balance for the FNL in favour of participation rather than continuing to remain outside the negotiations. In any event, while its willingness to talk is to be welcomed, the proof of its commitment to peace remains to be seen. As at the time of writing, the meeting between the FNL and Ndayizeye was taking place in the Netherlands.

Other recent events provide further sources of hope for a sustained conclusion to the conflict in Burundi. President Ndayizeye met for the first time with CNDD-FDD leader Nkurunziza in South Africa between 19 and 21 August 2003 as a prelude to the regional summit on Burundi in Dar es
Salaam (Cornish 2003a:15). These talks resulted in two accords – in October and November – outlining the sharing of military and political power in Burundi (IRIN 19 December 2003). This in turn led to the signing of a global peace pact between the government of Burundi and the CNDD. The pact also marked the beginning of the Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Repatriation/Rehabilitation (DDR) process of cantonment of fighters from the CNDD-FDD and Mugabarabona’s wing of the FNL. Some of the Hutu rebels come from Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and so will be ‘repatriated’ while the Burundian fighters will undergo a process of social reintegration.

In terms of the agreement reached between the CNDD and the government, Nkurunziza was awarded the post of Minister of State for Good Governance, the third most powerful government appointment in Burundi after the president and vice-president, who are obliged to consult with him on matters of state security and government appointments (IRIN 9 January 2004). In addition to this and other political appointments (including three ministerial posts), the CNDD negotiated 40 percent of posts in the army staff and 35 percent in the police force, placing the CNDD in a position of considerable power both politically and militarily (IRIN 8 December 2003). The CNDD also holds 13 of the 33 appointments to the Joint Military High Command, in accordance with the Technical Forces Agreement signed in November in Pretoria, the other 20 appointees being drawn from the existing army ranks. This constitutes a dramatic reversal of FFD’s earlier rejection of the Arusha accord.

**Development and Economic Considerations**

Optimism about the prospects for peace in Burundi must be tempered by a sober assessment of the devastating economic impact of 10 years of war. Burundi was ranked fifth from the bottom of the World Bank’s Human Development Index in 2003. According to a report by Save the Children (2003), it is one of the worst countries in the world in which to be a woman or a child in terms of the overall threat to human security. Burundi’s economic fortunes since the 1970s have been in persistent decline, which has become more dramatic since 1993.

In its 2003 report Human Rights Watch (HRW) emphasised the negative impact of the conflict on Burundi’s civilian population, who are often caught between the army and rebel forces. This often results in civilian deaths due to armed reprisals and economic hardship when they are forced to flee from their homes and farmlands. HRW noted that both the army and the rebels disrupt agriculture, which leads to the threat of starvation, and also disrupts humanitarian work. The report notes that ‘[e]ven as the peace process was supposedly moving forward, ordinary Burundians were subject to daily violations of their rights and to conditions of the worst misery’ (Sculier 2003:47). This victimisation, however, only furthers impulses towards dehumanisation and can fuel cycles of hatred and revenge.

In 2003 Burundi was to be the (pledged) recipient of substantial sums of foreign aid and humanitarian assistance from the European Union (EU), individual donor countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organisation. In May the IMF announced a $13 million credit of immediately available funds for post-conflict emergency aid. Much of this aid, pledged at donor conferences in Paris and Geneva in 2000 and 2001, was yet to be disbursed by the end of the year, with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan expressing serious concern over the economic plight of Burundians (IRIN 16 December 2003). Annan cautioned that the progress made towards peace during the year could be scuttled if the population of Burundi did not
receive as a ‘peace dividend’ an improvement in their living conditions. This sentiment was echoed by the UN Economic and Social Council after a visit to Burundi in November 2003, emphasising that with the cessation of hostilities in Burundi, there was now a desperate need for financial humanitarian assistance to support health initiatives, and to assist returning refugees. Otherwise the fragile peace could be shattered.

A further donors’ conference – the fourth Forum of Partners for Development in Burundi – was scheduled for 13-14 January 2004 in Brussels (IRIN 9 January 2004), which, in light of the FNL’s agreement to meet with Ndayizeye, was viewed with some optimism. If the condition for the release of aid is peace, then argued Ndayizeye, ‘[t]his should clear hesitations by the international community for it to release the aid promised to Burundi’ (IRIN 6 January 2003). Over $1 billion was pledged at the conference by the EU, World Bank, United States, Britain, Germany and Belgium. This was earmarked for the reconstruction of Burundi over the next three years. Specifically, the funds will be used for debt alleviation, the programme of reintegrating returning exiles, supporting the programme for ‘reinforcing good governance’ and the reform of the army and security forces (IRIN 15 January 2005).

Conclusion: Signs of Hope and the Way Forward

Events in Burundi in 2003 have defied those who doubted that the 2000 Arusha Accord could form the basis of a negotiated peace by incorporating previously excluded parties into the agreement. A permanent solution to the Burundian crisis, however, lies not in agreements forged behind closed doors. The negotiation process must be supplemented by the involvement of ordinary Burundians, not only the rank and file of the political parties and armed groups at the negotiating table. Although CNDD-FDD’s inclusion in the government is a positive sign, concrete efforts to improve the basic quality of life of ordinary Burundians, through a peace dividend, are necessary to ensure support by more than just rebel leaders. As a result, the international community should encourage and support grass-roots initiatives for reconciliation and economic development.

Financial pledges and the passive presence of the African Mission in Burundi (AMIB), the African Union force led by South Africa in Burundi, are not enough. Burundi needs sustained international support – humanitarian and economic and possibly even a more robust military presence – in the form of a UN peacekeeping force in order to keep up the momentum for sustainable peace. This was underscored by the appeal of Jacob Zuma, the facilitator of the peace process, to the UN Security Council in December 2003. Zuma argued that the conditions for a UN peacekeeping force had been met, and that this was needed to supplement the presence of AMIB in Burundi’s transition (IRIN 5 December 2003). These twin elements of support for the peace process – financial and military – are necessary if the hopes for sustainable peace and transition to democracy in Burundi are to be realised.

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Endnotes

1 The total population of Burundi is over six million, and possibly as high as 7.2 million, according to recent estimates. The war makes it impossible to conduct a census, and so these figures are estimates only. For further detail on
the geography and demography of Burundi, see Burundi Information, www.burundi.org/english/uk_05/history/histoire_01.html

2 The first colonising power was Germany, from 1884-1948, and subsequently Belgium (in terms of its responsibilities imposed by the UN Trustee Council from 1948 until independence in 1962).

3 The Hutu comprise 84% to 85% of the population, the Tutsi 14-15% and the Twa or 'Pygmy' people around 1%.

4 Both Bagaza and Buyoya are still actors in Burundian politics today. Buyoya was to become the first interim President under the power-sharing agreement laid down by the Arusha Accord in 2000, and Bagaza (after a few months under house arrest in 2002) has re-emerged as the leader of an extreme right-wing Tutsi party, Parti pour le Redressement National (PARENA).

5 This included a pledge of nearly $200 million in August, more than half of which was earmarked for development.

References


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