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Burundi: The Peace Process and U.S. Policy

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Summary

Burundi, a small Central African nation of 6 million people, has been in political turmoil since the assassination of the democratically elected president, Melchior Ndadaye, in 1993. An estimated 200,000 people have died over the past decade due to ethnic violence. Since the mid 1990s, Burundi's neighbors have tried to mediate between the government and various political and armed factions. In August 2000, the government of Burundi and most of the opposition groups signed a peace agreement in Arusha, Tanzania under the auspices of former President Nelson Mandela, nominated as the facilitator of the peace talks in October 1999. President Clinton attended the signing ceremony with over a dozen heads of state. Notwithstanding the August agreement, several armed groups have not signed the agreement and fighting between government security forces and rebel groups has intensified.

Background

Since independence from Britain in 1962, the politics of Burundi have been largely dominated by the Tutsi-led military and political establishment. In June 1993, Major Pierre Buyoya, who came to power in a bloodless coup in September 1987, ended the political grip of the military when he accepted his defeat by Melchior Ndadaye, a Hutu, in a multi-party election that he had called. However, the transfer of power to a Hutu-led government did not end the influence of the Tutsi, who represent 14% of the population, while the Hutu are about 85%.

Ndadaye attempted to implement a number of important changes in local government, to build a multi-ethnic cabinet coalition, and to increase diversity in the army. Critics charged that his reforms increased divisions in the country and threatened the Tutsi. Opposing these changes, a small group of Tutsi army officers attempted a military putsch in October 1993, assassinating Ndadaye along with several of his ministers. The putsch failed, but sparked ethnic violence in which an estimated 100,000 people, mostly Tutsis, were killed. The ethnic violence subsided and the political crisis was resolved after prolonged negotiations between the ruling Hutu-dominated Burundi Democratic Front (Frodebu) and the Tutsi-dominated Union for National Progress (Uprona), the former

ruling party. The negotiations resulted in the election of a new Speaker for the National Assembly, Sylvestre Ntibantunganya, who had succeeded President Ndadaye as leader of Frodebu. In late January 1994, Cyprien Ntaryamira, a Hutu and former Minister of Agriculture, was elected president by the National Assembly.

In April 1994, Ntaryamira was killed along with the President of Rwanda when the plane they were sharing was shot down over the airport at Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. Burundi authorities temporarily avoided a major political crisis by confirming Ntibantunganya as an interim president, and later president. In September 1994, after months of negotiations, the parties agreed on a power-sharing arrangement in which the ruling Frodebu agreed to give the opposition 45% of government positions, including the post of the prime minister. In early 1995, President Ntibantunganya agreed to replace the Speaker and the prime minister to avoid another crisis with the Tutsi-dominated parties and military.

The Buyoya Regime

In late July 1996, a group of Tutsi extremists attacked President Ntibantunganya's motorcade at the funeral for 350 Tutsis killed by Hutu rebels, and the President sought refuge at the U.S. ambassador's residence, fearing for his life.¹ On July 25, 1996, the Burundi army seized power and appointed former military leader Pierre Buyoya as head of the military junta. Buyoya later suspended the National Assembly and banned all political activities. In his first public address, Buyoya appealed to the international community to help him bring stability and defended the takeover of power as a necessary step to "rescue a people in distress." In response to the military takeover, Burundi's neighbors and several other African nations (Tanzania, Rwanda, Zaire/Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) imposed sanctions on the crisis-prone central African nation.²

The countries outlined several conditions for the lifting of the sanctions: the restoration of the dissolved National Assembly; the reinstatement of political parties; democratic reforms; the creation of a national unity government; unconditional internal peace negotiations with Hutu rebel and opposition groups; and participation in external peace talks. The Organization of African Unity (OAU), the United Nations, the United States, and the European Union all initially backed the sanctions. The United States condemned the military takeover but, aside from public support for the regional embargo, refrained from taking additional measures to punish the military junta. Three months after taking power, Buyoya reopened the National Assembly and lifted the ban on political parties. Initially, he indicated that he would negotiate with the rebels only if they first laid down their arms, but in early October 1996, in a letter to regional heads of state, he demonstrated a willingness to participate in unconditional talks. The African nations continued the embargo, arguing that Buyoya needed to do more on negotiating a peaceful agreement with the rebels. The regional measures had a serious impact on the Burundian

¹ The former president left the residence after several months and became politically active as one of the leaders of Frodebu.

² Dellios, Hugh. "Burundi's Neighbors Vow to Bring New Military Regime 'To Its Knees': Economic Embargo Has Early Impact." *Chicago Tribune*. September 8, 1996.

economy and had also increased domestic pressure on Buyoya as extremists in both parties use the hardship to undermine his political power.

In January 1999, the regional African leaders formally suspended economic sanctions against Burundi, with the hope that such action might reinvigorate the peace process. However, the suspension was to be “subject to review based on the progress made in the [peace] negotiations.” Internal peace negotiations began in late 1997, leading to the Internal Partnership for Peace (internal political reconciliation process launched by Buyoya) and a new transitional constitution. Buyoya was sworn in as transitional president in June 1998, two days after signing into law the new transitional constitution designed to pave the way for a power-sharing government. In the transitional constitution, the position of prime minister was split into two vice presidential positions, one of which will be responsible for the political and administrative domains, the other to supervise the economic and social domains, and to be filled by one Tutsi and one Hutu. The National Assembly was expanded from 80 to 121 members in order to accommodate opposition parties and regional interests.

The Peace Process

Former President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, was the principal mediator in the Burundi peace process after his appointment at a regional conference in November of 1995, which was later approved by the OAU. He held this position until his death on October 14, 1999. Seventeen factions, including the government, Frodebu (Hutu-dominated), and Uprona (Tutsi-dominated) all signed a cease-fire agreement in July, 1998. The agreement also fixed the length of negotiations at three months and foresaw the creation of commissions responsible for negotiating issues related to the establishment of a democratic, power-sharing government. Talks began on July 21, 1998, in Arusha, Tanzania and lasted for ten days, focusing predominantly on the rules of procedure and debate on the root cause of the problem in Burundi. Discussions resumed behind closed doors in Arusha in mid-October 1998, and delegates and the mediators established four sub-committees to address four issues agreed to earlier. The four issues on the agenda

Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi– August 28, 2000

Protocol I: Nature of the Burundi Conflict, Problems of Genocide and Exclusion and Their Solutions.

- prevention of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide;
- elimination of exclusionary policies based on ethnicity, region, religion, or gender;
- national reconciliation and the creation of the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Protocol II: Democracy and Good Governance.

- protection of fundamental human rights;
- multiparty politics;
- creation of a transitional government.

Protocol III: Peace and Security for All.

- specifications for defense and security forces;
- ceasefire guidelines.

Protocol IV: Reconstruction and Development.

- guidelines for rehabilitation and resettlement of refugees and displaced persons;
- physical and economic reconstruction goals.

Protocol V: Guarantees on Implementation of the Agreement

- Implementation Monitoring Committee, including representatives of Burundian Government, political parties, the United Nations (chair), The Organization of African Unity, and the regional Peace Initiative on Burundi ensure implementation of the protocols;
- diplomatic and material support role of the international community;
- United Nations International Peacekeeping Force.

were: the nature of the conflict, institutions and good governance, security, and economic reconstruction.

The Arusha peace talks excluded several armed factions, including the Front for the Defense of Democracy (FDD), a splinter group from the CNDD. The leader of the FDD, Colonel John Bosco Ndayikengurukiye, claims to be the true leader of CNDD, although Nyangoma is seen by the Tanzanians as the legitimate head of party.³ This division within the external opposition has complicated the peace process in Arusha. Nyerere insisted that the FDD cannot take part in the talks as long as the issue of leadership was not resolved. The FDD and the Forces for National Liberation (FNL) refused to honor the ceasefire agreement as long as they were excluded, prompting the Government of Burundi to assert that it was not bound by the ceasefire agreement. The Government of Burundi argued that the inclusion of FDD and other armed groups in the peace talks is pivotal for the stability of the country and implementation of the agreement on security matters.

By the end of 1998, three rounds of peace talks had been held in Arusha. The progress made during the third round prompted the U.N. Security Council in November to recommend that the countries neighboring Burundi suspend sanctions, and the UN also appointed a special envoy to Burundi, Cheikh Tidiane Sy of Senegal. European Union (EU) officials, however, warned that the resumption of international cooperation should not be complete until “a peace agreement has been concluded by all the parties.” The fifth round of talks, held in July of 1999, termed a failure by Nyerere, were scheduled to be resumed in September. Nyerere blamed the Burundi government stating that “the governmental delegates utilized the pretext of violence to obstruct the costly negotiations,” though simultaneously condemning the continuation of hostilities.

Developments in 1999-2000

With the death of Nyerere, former South African President Nelson Mandela was selected as the new facilitator in a meeting in Arusha. Most of the parties involved in the peace process, including the government of Burundi, favored his nomination. Many were of the opinion that the Nyerere-led negotiations had faltered because he had refused to allow the participation of Ndayikengurukiye's army after it splintered from another rebel group. Mandela, though, argued that “we cannot sideline anybody who can create instability in the country ... we must find ways of accommodating them in these discussions, either by inviting them to join or by addressing them separately, but we cannot ignore them.”⁴ Just as the Burundian government had accused Nyerere of having a leaning toward the Hutu rebels, FDD leader Ndayikengurukiye initially voiced reservation over Mandela who, he argued, had, as leader of South Africa, “helped the putschist government of Burundi with arms and helped them bypass a regional embargo.”

In July and August of 2000, another regional summit was held in Arusha in an attempt at forging a peace agreement. Mandela called for the closing of ‘regroupment’

³ “New Leader for Hutu Rebels in Burundi.” BBC World News. May 8, 1998.

⁴ Foreign Broadcast Information Service, January 4, 2000.

camps⁵ by the end of July. An estimated 10,000 people remain in the camps for fear of attack should they return to their homes. Mandela also set a deadline of August 28, 2000, for the signing of a ceasefire agreement. On August 28, an partial agreement was reached at Arusha which was signed by 14 parties, seven Hutu and seven Tutsi. The FDD and FNL did not sign these accords. Twenty heads of state were at this meeting, including President Clinton. The agreement calls for a transitional government and the creation of a new upper house of parliament whose makeup would be 50% Hutu and 50% Tutsi. The deal also calls for the integration of Hutus into the military; a heretofore Tutsi-dominated force and the creation of a transitional government until elections are held in three years.

The FNL leader, the only rebel head to come to the meeting (the FDD and CNDD sent low-level delegations), refused to sign because three rebel demands were not addressed by the mediators. They called for the release of 11,000 prisoners whom the rebels see as political detainees but are being held by the government on charges of genocide; the further dismantling of regroupment camps; and the return of all Hutu civilians to their own areas. They also challenge Mandela's recommendation that Buyoya lead the transition. The Tutsi negotiators opposed the deployment of an international peacekeeping force in Burundi while the Hutu groups had not yet agreed to a general amnesty. This proposed force of 2,000 is, in part, to provide security for returning Hutu leaders that had been in exile. They also expressed concern that the 1993 genocide in Burundi be dealt with and "not be mentioned in passing."

On September 20, 2000, the Arusha peace agreement was revisited in Nairobi at a regional heads of state summit, including the leaders of Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. The three small Tutsi-led parties that had previously not signed the Arusha accord, did so at this meeting. This time the FNL did attend, and the FDD and CNDD only sent low-level delegations. None signed the agreement and they were given one month to prepare for the next effort at achieving a comprehensive ceasefire. If this deadline is not met and these groups do not attend with the purpose of ending hostilities, the heads of state threaten the imposition of sanctions against them. At this meeting, the regional leaders (Kenya's Moi, Burundi's Buyoya, Uganda's Museveni, Rwanda's Kagame and Tanzania's Mkapa) "reserved the right to take such action or initiative as may be necessary in conjunction with the United Nations and international community in general to put an end to the cycle of hostilities."⁶ On September 25, the parties opened talks in Arusha to select the leader of a transitional government that is to last for three years and to nominate a committee of eight to oversee the implementation of the peace accord.

Recent Developments

In late February 2001, the FNL and FDD rebels attacked Bujumbura, resulting in more than 40 people killed and 114 wounded. The attack on Bujumbura was the most daring in recent months in which Hutu rebels engaged government troops in heavy fighting. The Burundi army regained control after a week but lost over a dozen soldiers during the week-long fighting.

⁵ Beginning in late 1999, the government of Burundi began forcing civilians into "regroupment camps" around Bujumbura, allegedly to protect the civilian population from rebel attacks.

⁶ BBC News Online, September 20, 2000.

In April 2001, a group of soldiers stormed the government's radio and television station in Bujumbura and announced the ouster of President Buyoya, who was on a state visit to Gabon. The coup was put down by Buyoya loyalists in the army and the President returned from Gabon and regained control.

U.S. Policy

The U.S. government is not directly involved in the Burundi peace process, but has been actively engaged in seeking a peaceful settlement in Burundi through diplomatic means. Former Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region Howard Wolpe traveled to Burundi and the region extensively to assist in facilitating the peace process. In congressional testimony in March 1998, Wolpe identified the broad United States objectives to be the prevention of another round of massive ethnic killings, ending the violence, encouraging a negotiated settlement, and addressing humanitarian needs.⁷ Wolpe also reiterated the U.S. commitment to hold the Burundian government to its promise to disband all of the regroupment camps.

On January 19, 2000, a U.N. Security Council session on Burundi was organized by U.S. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke. He condemned the Burundian government's policy of forced regroupment as well as the attacks being carried out against civilians by all armed groups. He also pledged an additional \$500,000 from the U.S. to the Arusha peace process. For fiscal year 1999, the U.S. provided over \$9 million in emergency assistance to Burundi through the U.N. and other international organizations. In FY2000, USAID provided \$12.2 million to international organizations whose activities focus on health, nutrition, food security, agriculture, water and sanitation and distribution of non-food emergency relief items. In addition, USAID gave \$400,000 to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in Burundi. The U.S. also provided \$22.7 million worth of food to the World Food Program (WFP). The U.S. has also given \$500,000 for a Child Survival/HIV Aids projects.⁸

At the Arusha talks, President Clinton told the participants that the international community "will support your efforts to demobilize combatants and integrate them into a national army. We will help you bring refugees home and to meet the needs of displaced children and orphans." He also promised assistance in the economic and social sectors to support sustainable development and peace. While a comprehensive ceasefire is yet to be achieved, former National Security Adviser Samuel Berger termed the framework agreement of late August "an important step in an ongoing process to establish a secure peace in Burundi." The Bush Administration has not appointed a Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region and has not yet commented on the Burundi situation. Administration officials say the United States remains committed to the Arusha Accords.

⁷ Wolpe, Howard. Prepared Testimony before the House International Relations Committee, Subcommittees on International Operations and Human Rights and Africa. March 5, 1998.

⁸ USAID at [http://www.usaid.gov/hum_response/ofda/burundi_fs1_fy00.html]