

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

COHESION ACROSS ETHNIC BARRIERS IN BURUNDI

by Ruth Ann Hudson

“Aha, Aha! Over here, over here!” a gangly boy screams to his teammate, “Nterera umupira! Pass the ball to me!” A smaller boy, about ten years old, kicks the soccer ball to his friend, who quickly maneuvers to score a goal. “Umurwi wacu watsinze! Our team won!” the teammates exclaim in celebration.

The boys communicate in Kirundi, one of the two official languages in Burundi, yet one is a Tutsi and one a Hutu. You would never guess by looking at them, nor from hearing them speak, yet the conflict between their two ethnic groups is one that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives in the Great Lakes Region.

Burundi is a small landlocked Central African nation with a land area slightly smaller than the state of Maryland. It has an agricultural economy with roughly 90% of the population dependent on subsistence farming and with the second-largest population density in sub-Saharan Africa. The UNDP Human Development Index, calculated on the basis of the life expectancy at birth, the GDP per capita, the adult literacy rate and school enrollment, places Burundi as the third-worst ranking country in the world, at number 171 out of 173.

It is within this context that Burundi grapples with one of the most ethnically polarized populations in the world, composed of three primary ethnic groups: Hutu (85%), Tutsi (14%), and Twa (1%). As the smallest minority group, the Twa have historically remained completely marginalized from the rest of the population, with the primary ethnic conflict between the Tutsi and the Hutu. Both Hutu and Tutsi groups speak the same language, share the same culture, live on the same *collines* (hills) and often intermarry. Most sources point to the original roots of ethnic conflict in the colonial exploitation of the existing social hierarchy, which institutionalized the domination of the Tutsi over the Hutu, and the historical exclusion of the Hutu population from education and resources. This systematic exclusion was quickly manipulated by ruling elites shortly following independence in 1962. The political system that resulted was singularly defined by ethnic conflict, and the violence that ensued is similar in many ways to the violence that continues today.

Since independence, ethnically motivated violence has occurred in 1965, 1969, 1972, 1988 and 1993, with particularly severe killings in 1972 and 1993. In 1972, an estimated

250,000 people were killed and an estimated 150,000 forced to flee the country. From 1993 to the present day, an estimated 300,000 people have been killed as a result of the conflict.

ADDRESSING ETHNIC DIVISIONS AT THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL

The soccer team these boys play on was created through the initiative of a discussion group organized by IFES in the Burundian communities of Ngagara and Kamenge. Groups of women and youth were asked to conduct concrete activities that would help bring peace and reconciliation among the ethnic groups in their communities. In these rural areas, women and youth have few economic resources to devote to such activities, and so they focused their energy on improvements that could be made at little or no monetary cost.



IFES began its first program in Burundi by organizing discussion groups that brought together Hutus and Tutsis, with the understanding that the roots of democracy in Burundi needed to be cultivated first at the grassroots level. A power-sharing agreement between the ethnic groups was unlikely to be successful while conflict and violence remained the only avenues to resolve disputes for the majority of the population. As had historically been the case, the majority of Burundian civil society was excluded from the process leading to the 2001 Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Accords (APRA), and very few members of civil society were aware of its implications. With APRA in place, Burundian civil society had a critical opportunity to constructively participate in the development of the new government institutions. Without resources and training, however, civil society lacked the fundamental management, communication, lobbying and advocacy skills needed to build effective civic pressure towards reconciliation and democratic rule.

The initial IFES discussion groups led to the formation of a network of women and youth throughout rural Bujumbura. IFES provided training on communication, lobbying and advocacy skills and conducted workshops on rights and issues related to reconciliation and the democratic process, in addition to concrete activities such as the soccer teams in Ngagara and Kamenge. The youth in Cibitoke and Kinama identified the biggest concern in their communities as the need for housing for returning refugees. Across the country, the return of refugees is raising serious concerns for many

communities. Burundi currently has the largest internally displaced population in the Great Lakes Region, with an estimated 338,000 people living in 226 camps inside the county. Another 639,000 Burundian refugees reside in neighboring countries. In Cibitoke and Kinama, many of the returnees, both Hutu and Tutsi, would return only to find their houses destroyed by the fighting. In response, Hutu and Tutsi youth worked together on the weekends to make bricks out of mud and rebuild houses to welcome the refugees back into their communities and provide them with adequate housing.

ENDING THE LEGACY OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE

The Burundian state, like many African states, has failed to fulfill its most basic functions: protecting its citizens, distributing wealth equitably, and establishing fair rules of the game. Instead, the political system has been a monopoly of privileged groups, determined by ethnicity, who have accumulated vast resources of power and wealth and have defended these resources through routine violence. Unequal distribution of wealth and the repeated manipulation of ethnic tensions by the privileged class have resulted in a general sense of frustration and distrust by the population toward the government and toward the ethnic groups associated with those in power.

It is difficult for individuals and communities affected by ethnic violence to remove themselves from the cycle of violence that has become institutionalized in Burundi. In an environment of severely limited economic and political resources, ethnic conflicts threaten the most basic survival of the individual. Under such circumstances, it is no small feat to join together with members of a different ethnic group to play soccer or build houses for refugees.

Another IFES program in Burundi, the Burundi Initiative for Peace, recently led to a ground-breaking event—a large-scale public demonstration of support for national peace. In late April 2003, IFES organized a National Walk for Peace in the thirteen provinces of Bujumbura, Rurale, Bururi, Cankuzo, Cibitoke, Gitega, Karuzi, Kirundo, Muramvya, Muyinga, Mwaro, Ngozi and Ruyigi. Over 50,000 people from these provinces participated in the walk, and radio stations aired programs about peace throughout the day. Following the walk, communities in each province joined together in expressions of national unity through music, dance and discussions on peace and the future of Burundi. The events served as a public display of civil society's commitment to peace and support for an end to ethnic violence. In a country where people historically have had little or no opportunity to participate in public life, this mobilization of Burundian civil society was unprecedented.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE – CIVIL SOCIETY'S ROLE IN ESTABLISHING COHESION

While the Burundian government and political parties grapple with sensitive issues surrounding the recent peace accord, the absence of a ceasefire perpetuates the volatility of urban and rural Burundi. If Burundi is to make the transition to a healthy, peaceful democracy featuring a constructive and

committed civil society, it will be through the efforts of everyday citizens.

Ethnic divisions, encouraged by a system that inherently allocates wealth and power inequitably, have been manipulated to create circumstances of chaos and instability for Burundian citizens across the country. As shown by the eagerness of the civil society groups IFES has supported, the majority of the population is tired of the conflict and the violence. Burundians across the nation realize that violence cannot continue to be the answer to conflict, and that the existing political system based on ethnic discrimination has failed Burundi. The efforts of everyday citizens must be accompanied by genuine institutional reforms, specifically to ensure that the military, the judiciary and the educational system are structured in an inclusive manner. Without a political system that enables Burundian citizens to choose their leaders through a democratic system and ensures that no individuals are above the law, national unity will be impossible to achieve.

For now, the boys on the soccer team plan for their next game. "Tozotsinda muzoraba. Twese hamwe dushobora gutsinda uwariwe wese," one Hutu boy of about age fourteen explains to his Tutsi teammate. "We will win, you will see. Together we can beat anyone." **E!**

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