

## Rebuilding societies in post-conflict countries

# The issues facing Burundi

At 28,000 km<sup>2</sup>, Burundi is a little smaller than Belgium. But the issues that face this tiny country are of huge significance. For years Burundi has been caught up in the ethnic conflict which has affected its east African neighbours. But now, as it moves towards a tentative peace, what happens in Burundi will have echoes – for good or ill – in neighbouring Rwanda and Congo.



Instability, ethnic rivalry and civil wars have plagued the country's history. Indeed, history itself is hotly contested in Burundi and there are often many different versions of events.

Burundi's first tribal people, the Twa, lived in this area for millennia, and 5,000 years ago were joined by the first incomers, the Hutu. The Tutsi first came to Burundi in the fifteenth century AD, and all three are considered to be the native peoples of what was initially called Urundi.

From the seventeenth century onwards, Urundi was governed by Tutsi kings. It was incorporated into German East Africa in 1899, and during the First World War Belgium became the new colonial power, merging Urundi with its neighbour, Ruanda.

In 1959, ethnic violence began to afflict Ruanda-Urundi on a large scale. Violence against the Tutsi in Ruanda sent thousands of refugees south into Urundi. This was the backdrop against which Urundi achieved full independence, separating from Ruanda to become an independent monarchy named Burundi on 1 July 1962. The

fledgling constitution introduced by King Mwambutsa IV made equal provision for Hutu and Tutsi alike, but political assassinations, the deposition of the monarchy, and several coups d'état brought instability and violence from the earliest years.

In 1972, the massacre of 150,000 Hutus took place, the reasons for which remain disputed. There was a mass revolt of Hutus against Tutsi rule in 1988 and the following year saw the first attempt at a national unity referendum. The number of Hutus and women in the government increased and Burundi's first Hutu prime minister took office, followed by its first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, in 1993. But Ndadaye was soon assassinated by Tutsi soldiers and reprisals gave way to the chaos of all-out civil war, not helped by the death of the second Hutu president in the plane crash which also killed the Rwandan leader in 1994.

By 2001, after years of massacres and violence, Burundi was ready for talks. Sporadic fighting continued but the steps towards peace gathered pace, too. Nelson Mandela mediated and

the framework for a new Burundi was agreed. Power-sharing deals were struck and in 2003 the first peaceful transition of power took place, as agreed two years before.

Despite setbacks along the way, the violence has diminished and political stability seems achievable. The civil war ended officially in 2006, and the government's focus has turned to reconstruction and rebuilding Burundi's relations with its neighbours.

Burundi has become safe enough to welcome home returning exiles. But that in itself could generate more problems: the returnees have often been away for years and are not familiar with a peaceful Burundi. Access to land is a potential flashpoint. But observers agree that Burundi can make a major contribution to peace in the region if it can pass through its next general election in 2010 without violence. It will have proved that the path to peace can be cleared, and become a beacon of hope to its neighbours. This is the future which Quakers, through the efforts of the AFSC, are helping to realise.

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