

Rebuilding societies in post-conflict countries

The AFSC in Burundi



The work of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in Bujumbura comes at a critical time for Burundi. After decades of intercommunal violence, a fledgling settlement has given way to the realistic prospect that peace has finally returned to Burundi.

How the AFSC works

The AFSC's presence in Burundi is part of its wider strategy in the region. By helping the people of Burundi restore peace, the AFSC believes that a valuable precedent will be set which could clear the way to peace in surrounding nations which are also afflicted by ethnic violence.

There are two elements to the work in Burundi: peace education and humanitarian assistance. AFSC provides support to local organisations, particularly the Friends Evangelical Church of Burundi. Recent partners have included the (Quaker-founded) Alternatives to Violence Project, which has supported local elders who traditionally deal with conflict in Burundian society but have found this role increasingly difficult; the African Youth Initiative Network, which has taught young people about non-violent action; and Help Channel Burundi, an ethnically inclusive charity which aims to co-ordinate community action, such as caring for people with HIV/AIDS, for orphans and foster families, or arranging local tree-planting programmes to combat soil degradation.

Friends in Burundi

Burundi Yearly Meeting has around 50,000 Friends at 54 monthly meetings. The Friends Evangelical Church (FEC) gave rise to a now-independent practical action wing, the Ministry for Peace and Reconciliation under the Cross

(MIPAREC), which offers food assistance, monitors elections, supports women's groups, helps reintegration work with repatriated people, and seeks to empower communities to address the issues they identify for themselves.

**“Without effort,
no harvest will be
abundant.”**

Burundian proverb

Burundi's next steps

As peace settles over Burundi, there remain risks. The recent relative peace has allowed the repatriation of people from exile, but it is leading to a change in the make-up of the population. The refugees returning from Tanzania are mainly Hutu, while the internally-displaced are mainly Tutsi. These repatriated people are often fearful,

unfamiliar with a peaceful Burundi, and mistrustful of political leaders. Many ex-prisoners have been released, leading victims to feel that justice has not been served. The civil war has left thousands of young people without any education or even constructive ways of spending their time. Many of them are ex-combatants who formed their closest relationships while fighting alongside other rebels, and old allegiances for them – and in many cases for the returning refugees – can prove hard to lay aside. Access to land – in a small, densely populated country where 90% of people are subsistence farmers – could also be a source of conflict. To get through the 2010 general election peacefully would be to make a bold statement that Burundi is overcoming its divisions: the AFSC, supported by two QPSW peaceworkers in 2009, is working hard to help Burundians achieve this peaceful milestone after so many years of violence.



Burundi's repatriated people: Returning refugees wait to be registered in Magara camp for internally-displaced people.