

# BURUNDI Update

## Search for Common Ground

### Situation Update

Burundi's electoral process ended on September 23rd with the first colline-level elections in the country's history. The peaceful completion of the first elections in over a decade is a milestone in the peace process. International donors who had stopped providing aid to the once war-thorn country have resumed cooperation, a sign that confidence in sustainable peace is growing. However, the new government has to rapidly address numerous challenges: the FNL (*Front National de Libération*), the last remaining rebel group, hasn't recognised the government and thousand of refugees from neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, living in unsafe camps, fear repatriation. Also, the withdrawal of the UN mission in Burundi, which recently started and should be completed around mid 2006, may create a vacuum at the security level.

### The Village of Rutegama, "Once Awash in Blood but now a Haven of Peace"

The community in Rutegama (Muramvya Province) has been split in two since 1993 when Tutsis fled their home to settle temporarily in Kiganda. Search for Common Ground (SFCG), after six months of regular visits to the community, convinced 117 members of both groups (65 men and 52 women) to come together in April 2005 to consider reconciliation. During this meeting, the residents invited the displaced to come back and re-settle in the community. The reconciliation process culminated with the Day of Reconciliation in September, attended by 450 participants. Activities included speeches by community representatives and local authorities, the hand-over of a house built by the community for a returnee widow and her children, and the singing of peace songs composed by community members. In one of these songs, community members declared how "Rutegama was once awash in blood but now Rutegama is a haven of peace". Also, the community committed to building three more houses for returnees.

*"Now that we have forgiven, we have peace in our heart, we share the best and the worst", participant in the Reconciliation Day speaking on behalf of people who forgive others.*

SFCG organised several other activities aimed at reconciliation in different communities. For example, in the community of Mparamirundi (Ngozi Province), nearly 600 people, including the governor and the administrator of Busiga Commune, participated in their Reconciliation Day. Thanks to almost two years of work with the community -on issues such as conflict resolution, peaceful co-habitation, civic education, proper behaviour during elections - and meticulous preparation by the SFCG team (six preparatory meetings with the community), many activities took place, including speeches, a football match, a procession, cultural events, and a reception. Most of the speeches honoured the people who made the effort to distinguish themselves by taking a step towards reconciliation, and urged others to act as the "heroes of the day."

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## Training Sessions at the University of Burundi Contribute in Easing Tensions on Campus

Since 2001, Search for Common Ground's (SFCG's) Youth Project has been organizing annual training sessions at the University of Burundi, a place where inter-ethnic mistrust, strikes and loss of trust in the authorities is common. These sessions aim to reinforce student leaders' capacity in dealing with conflicts and promote dialogue among students and with their teachers. In August, 65 students (representing the student body, provincial associations, and political parties) attended the fourth and last phase of their training on conflict management and transformation, rumour management, and participatory planning. The participants were asked to demonstrate the techniques they learned during the four years of training. They gave examples of positive conflict management such as the peacemaking role they played in a recent conflict between students and university authorities concerning registration. Despite all the problems the university campus faces (delay in scholarship payments, progressive decrease in social welfare benefits, protests by teachers for decent salaries), the situation remained relatively calm, which shows the acquired maturity of the students over the past four trainings.

## The *Gardiens de la Paix* Learn to Address their Problems Peacefully

One particular challenge to Search For Common Ground (SFCG) is the work with young ex-combatants. Recently demobilised militia, including the *Gardiens de la Paix*, often undertake violent actions due to delays in the distribution of their demobilisation fees. To address this problem, SFCG's Youth Project has conducted numerous training sessions on conflict resolution and advocacy techniques in Bujumbura, Ruyigi and Ngozi, reaching hundreds of members of militia. These sessions gave them, for the first time, the opportunity to express their discontent in a non-violent manner. With the facilitators' help, they also established advocacy committees and a programme of regular dialogue with the authorities.

In Ruyigi in July 2005, SFCG worked with ex-*Gardiens de la Paix* to strengthen their advocacy capacities and to provide an opportunity for dialogue with the DDR authorities. This group had planned a strike in the area to push their claim for demobilisation payments, but agreed to the advocacy training despite their scepticism. In later meetings with DDR officials and provincial and NGOs representatives, the ex-militia members expressed their discontent and fears, and the officials agreed to involve them in the registration process planned for the next few weeks. The day ended with a football match, which released many of the tensions. The ex-militia did not paralyse the town and their representatives participated in the registration of the beneficiaries in the whole province, together with a commission from the DDR national office.

On another occasion, a group of 60 young demobilised *Gardiens de la Paix* and returnees came together for three days in Bujumbura. The objective of this gathering was to give them the opportunity to share their respective problems, learn about advocacy techniques in order to minimize the risk of violence, and contribute to their social reintegration. During the first day, facilitators faced several challenges: the ex-combatants did not see the need to cooperate with the returnees, whom they considered mere civilians, and the participants expected to be paid for their attendance. But by the second day, the facilitators managed to introduce the techniques of advocacy as an alternative to violence, to which the participants paid great attention. The participants agreed they would try negotiation when submitting their problems to the authorities, and they proposed joint projects, such as a sport tournament, in order to establish rapport.

SFCG in Burundi is grateful for the support of these donors:



## “Our Role During the Elections”: a Common Initiative from the Women Peace Centre and the Youth Project

After violence erupted in several communes, especially in Bujumbura Rural and Bubanza during the communal elections, the Women Peace Centre and the Youth Project decided to organize a three-day event to be held a week before the July 4th parliamentary elections. The main objectives, as indicated in the title “Our Role during the Election”, was to encourage key people to be involved in preventing violence linked to the elections and to have an active role in reducing tension,

« We want peace, but all those who come to meet us only speak about politics and want us to vote for them; we are afraid, we expect an attack at any time, you are the first ones who gather us together and calm us down » Participant from the dialogue session in Mumbumbu, Bujumbura Rural.

The methodological approach included new tools to convey messages: story flipcharts, games, radio announcements, and the *Centre Jeunes Kamenge*’s leaflets on citizens’ rights and obligations. In part thanks to the support of the local administration, more than 1,100 persons took part in these activities.

Due to the event’s great success, follow-up activities were planned in several communes during July. The fulfilled goal was to assess the communities’ behaviour during the parliamentary polls and to establish committees which would organize feedback sessions to the larger community and share what they had learned. In Mpanda (Bubanza) for example, 60 persons attended the evaluation where community leaders promoted social cohesion, mutual respect, free participation in debates and positive management of rumours by verifying their sources.

transforming conflicts, and managing rumours in their communities.



Waiting Peacefully for Results in Kiremba

## Congolese Refugees Take Initial Step in Reconciliation Process

In a refugee camp situated in Mwaro Province, a group of 100 Banyamulenge who had survived the August 2004 Gatumba massacre, attended a training session organized by Search for Common Ground’s (SFCG’s) Victims of Torture Project. In several past occasions, Banyamulenge refugees showed a violent attitude, among others toward NGOs’ personnel working in the camps. Therefore, SFCG’s team conducted a training on “how to break the cycle of violence” where facilitators and participants analyzed the different steps that make up this circle. Trainers also connected trauma and reconciliation by showing how a unhealed trauma can lead to violent actions.

The training had great impact as participants, after formulating the desire to start reconciliation activities with other Congolese, created a follow-up committee. To become trainers themselves, the committee’s members took part in a second training on issues such as trauma management and how to efficiently break the cycle of violence. Also, participants expressed the wish to travel back to their home communities in order to launch preliminary reconciliation activities.

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