

BURUNDI Update

Search for Common Ground

Situation Update

The recent crackdowns on members of the political opposition and on the media have called into question the stability of democracy and peace in Burundi. In November, trials convened for the seven people accused of plotting to topple the government, including former President Domitien Ndayizeye and former Vice President Alphonse Kadege, with the state seeking life sentences for the accused. The testimony of Alain Mugabarabona, a former head of one of the wings of the FNL (National Forces for Liberation) and one of the accused, forms the basis for the government's case. However, Mugabarabona denies the charges, insisting that his confession and subsequent implication of the other accused were only made after being tortured. Also in November, amid growing tensions between the government and the press, two journalists from Radio Publique Africaine (RPA) and the Director of Radio Isanganiro were arrested and immediately jailed, accused of broadcasting news that jeopardized the public security. The Director Radio Bonesha fled the country after being convicted as a part of the same crackdown. Finally, the director of RPA has been away from the country for several months. While relations have since improved following a series of meetings between President Pierre Nkurunziza and members of the press, as well as the acquittal and release of the jailed journalists in early January, the underlying conflict and threats to freedom of expression in Burundi remain. In spite of the acquittal of five of the co-defendants in the case of the alleged plot against the state, including that of Ndayizeye and Kadege in January, this instance underlined the challenges still present for the young Burundian democracy.

Meanwhile, steps were made in regards to resolving the country's daunting land crisis. The National Commission on Land and Other Goods (CNTB), was put in place by the government and began meeting with the land owners, returnees and refugees in Tanzania to get a sense of each group's grievances and find a path toward mediation in preparation for the planned return of thousands of refugees in the coming year. Unlike previous land commissions that addressed this problem by force, the CNTB is committed to dialogue and mediation.

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Launch of Transitional Justice Program

With the financial support of the Swiss government and in partnership with Radio Isanganiro, SFCG launched a new project to support the transitional justice process in Burundi. The purpose of this project is to better inform Burundians on the questions relating to truth and reconciliation in the country and in particular the role of the CVR and the special tribunal. The project centers on radio broadcasts intended to promote dialogue and greater understanding around these questions.

Results from Victims of Torture Project

With six years of SFCG leadership, the Victims of Torture Project (VOT) continues to work with partner organizations (APRODH, Ligue ITEKA, THARS and TPO) to identify and assist victims of torture and sexual violence in Burundi. As SFCG's involvement nears completion in 2007 many positive results of the program are becoming apparent, particularly in addressing the problem of torture. For example, APRODH's legal assistance activities, which include judiciary assistance transportation for plaintiffs and witnesses, prison visits, public advocacy, and the organization of meetings and discussions with government and military authorities have given victims the courage to pursue justice, while providing them with the legal and financial capacity to overcome bureaucratic and structural obstacles. Of the 309 VOT cases drawing APRODH's attention over the past year, 289 were taken up by the courts (according to court documents). 109 of those had been decided by the end of September. Of these 109 closed cases, 93 were judged in favor of the victims, with sentences ranging from 6 months to 30 years of imprisonment and up to 1.6 million Burundian Francs of damages. For the others, the evidence was not sufficient for a conviction, but the victims profited from a fair trial.

Overall, APRODH has observed a considerable decrease in the number of instances of torture victims from 2004 to 2006. This is particularly true for the number of cases of torture observed in the *cachots* (detention centres) around the country, where only APRODH had been providing assistance to the prisoners. With an almost identical strategy, approach, and number of activities, the number of cases reported reduced from 873 in 2004 to 221 overall in 2006 and from 527 in 2004 to 138 in 2006 in the detention centres. In order to facilitate the social rehabilitation of the victims, VOT partners work with a great number of groups giving support for the victims to answer the challenges to which the victims face while turning over to a normal life. 76 community support groups are now established and have started to implement social rehabilitation project for the victims. Between September and December, SFCG gave its support for fifteen generating income generating projects, including agricultural, animal breeding and small-scale trade projects.



As SFCG's direct involvement winds down, the VOT partners have begun to take on more and more responsibility for the management of the program. Consequently, SFCG has taken more of a coordinating role, focused on capacity building in project management and program design. With the end of SFCG's direct involvement, it is important to note that the four partners have formed a consortium to handle the project's future administration and oversight. These efforts to contribute to the future sustainability of the programme, as well as a recent generous grant from the EC, will allow the partners to continue their success.

Update on the Working Group on Transitional Justice

At the government's invitation, the Working Group on Transitional Justice, an informal network of NGOs founded by SFCG and Radio Isanganiro, met in November with the commission put in place by the government to pave the way towards the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR) and a special court. The working group also expressed its wish to regularly meet with the government delegation and share ideas on the evolution of the process and have a real contribution. The working group now plans to explore the issue of popular consultation in order to have concrete ideas to suggest during meetings with the government and a UN delegation that will be coming to Burundi in February or March. These recent developments have been important in pushing forward discussion around the TRC, as well as organising the disparate groups interested in transitional justice and providing them with a platform to engage with the government.

As reported in the previous update, the Group works to strategize on how civil society can best coordinate its efforts to ensure that the UN and government are consulting and informing the population on issues related to transitional justice and the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission (TRC).

Launch of Democratic Governance Project

In August, SFCG Burundi launched a democratic governance project funded by the Belgian Cooperation. The programme's primary focus is on leadership and citizenship at the local level, specifically targeting youth and women in three provinces: Ngozi, Makamba and Bujumbura Rural. A complementary grant has been approved by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for support of the role of women in governance in Makamba, Bururi, and Bujumbura. SFCG had met with several government representatives including the Minister of Good Governance during the planning of this project and gained their approval of the proposed activities.

SFCG will use national radio programming produced by Studio Ijambo, including 'Umuganda wawe' (your contribution), that addresses issues of citizenship and governance, combined with training activities for local government and association leaders in the targeted communes in order to strengthen their ability to participate effectively in local governance. SFCG will also encourage active citizenship among youth through *parlement scolaires* (elected student parliaments) and trips to the national parliament.



Listen to SFCG/Studio Ijambo programmes at www.studioijambo.org.

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



SFCG Burundi Honoured by Radio for Peacebuilding, Africa

Last month, Radio for Peacebuilding, Africa (RFPA) recognised the radio programmes that best contributed to peace and reduced tensions in groups and communities in 2006, honouring SFCG Burundi with two awards. SFCG Burundi won second prize in drama with a spot produced on the liberation of political prisoners and their reintegration and cohabitation with their communities of origin. The Burundi programme also won a second award in the Youth Radio Program category for a programme produced in August 2006 by five young journalists (also secondary school students) and under SFCG's supervision on the reintegration of demobilized child soldiers.



President Nkurunziza surrounded by four of the five award winning youth journalists following an interview with the president, sponsored by UNICEF.

As reported in the previous update, UNICEF funded the young journalists' five-week internships at SFCG's Studio Ijambo. Both programmes can be heard on the RFPA website www.radiopeaceafrica.org.

Community Basketball Court Project at Lycée Makamba

In late 2005, *Club Batissons la Paix* (Peacebuilding Club), an ethnically balanced youth group that intervenes in area conflicts in order to prevent further violence, approached SFCG with a proposition to construct a basketball court at the local Lycée Makamba in Makamba. In 2003, following several instances of interethnic violence in Makamba, SFCG began working with local officials and youth groups to help the community to begin to work through the underlying stereotypes and prejudices. With the support and mentoring of SFCG, local youth formed the *Club Batissons la Paix*. Over the past year, SFCG, in partnership with ONUB, supported and provided regular monitoring and follow-up to the *Club*, which completed the basketball court project at the end of last school year and dedicated the court at a ceremony coinciding with the beginning of the school year in September. The group envisioned the project with the goal of providing a 'safe space' and area of free exchange where local youth could come to spend time together without fear of violence and work together to resist intolerance and hatred within their community.

The group continues to intervene in local conflicts and, with the success of the project, has begun to plan similar cooperative community projects. The goal is for all local youth to have a place to come and meet others, away from the fear and misunderstanding that has plagued their community for years, in order to rebuild these communities in the future.

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