

# PEACEMAKING IN BURUNDI – A CASE STUDY OF REGIONAL DIPLOMACY BACKED BY INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING AND PEACEBUILDING

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## **1. Burundi at the brink of genocide (1993-1996)**

Burundi has been a land of prolonged political violence since her independence in 1962. This has taken different forms ranging from military coups, targeted assassinations of prominent politicians, mass massacres, refugees, internal displacement and lack of meaningful development. From 1966 to 1993 the politics of the country were dominated by the military, which staged three successive coups. After the assassination of the first democratically elected president, who also was the country's first ethnic Hutu president, on October 21, 1993, unprecedented political violence broke out and led to the death of more than 300,000 people.

The violence in Burundi was overshadowed by the civil war in the neighboring Rwanda which has the same ethnic composition with the Hutu majority and minority Tutsi. It was only after the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 that the international community started to take the violence in Burundi seriously and actively sought to avoid 'another Rwanda'. Between 1993 and 1996, no other country in Africa received a comparable amount of attention from many conflict resolution and mediation experts. The actors ranged from the United Nations, the then Organization of African Unity and later the African Union, non-government organization and academics.

In 1993 and 1994, the risk of genocide in Burundi was almost as severe as it was in Rwanda where it materialized. Incitement to genocide was going on every day. The government at the time was unwilling to protect its population from the looming threat of mass atrocities. What made the difference in successfully preventing genocide in Burundi was the substantial and sustained engagement of the international community which sent the right messages to the right people at the right time. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali appointed Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah as his Special Representative for Burundi, and the Security Council was seized of the situation in Burundi. At press conferences in Bujumbura, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah clearly stated that incitement to mass atrocities was unacceptable. The Organization of African Unity prepared a military plan that provided for enforcement action and the disarmament of all armed groups and the government in case of an escalation of the situation. In 1996, the UN Department of Political Affairs conducted an inquiry into the mass violence in Burundi and reported to the Security Council that acts of genocide had been perpetrated by certain Burundian parties. The warring factions in Burundi understood the message of the international community: traumatized by the genocide in Rwanda, it would not accept another genocide in Burundi. Accordingly, an escalation of the situation into full-fledged genocide was avoided.

## **2. Julius Nyerere's facilitation of the Burundi peace process**

The Burundi peace process is a case study where there has been coordination at a sub-regional, regional (Organization of African Unity and then the African Union) and the international level (United Nations and other players) to end a violent conflict. The Burundi peace process that began 15 years ago has gone through three main phases which displayed different political dynamics. This short paper will look at each phase and briefly explain its significance.

The first phase of the process began in November 1995 with the mediation by former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere. The process of his selection as mediator is intriguing in the sense that he was appointed by regional heads of state acting under the auspices of the Great Lakes Regional Peace Initiative on Burundi commonly known as the regional initiative, and not by the Organization of African Unity or the United Nations. This was significant insofar as it signaled that, from the onset, the region was going to take the lead in the mediation process while the United Nations and the rest of the international community would play a supporting role.

Only when the former President of Tanzania Julius Nyerere was appointed mediator in May 1996 one single authority in the mediation process began to emerge. The United Nations' approach to the conflict in Burundi did not differ much from the strategy pursued by the OAU/AU and other regional peacemakers. Each of these actors perceived the conflict as political with ethnic connotations. This consensus on the definition of the cause of the conflict was crucial for devising a common mediation strategy. The two-track conflict management efforts had both political and military elements. The political track aimed at bringing together all political players to hammer out a political compromise, and the military track involved protection of key political players and demobilization sites.

President Nyerere's major success was to bring together 19 Burundian delegates representing diverse political parties for talks in the northern Tanzanian town of Arusha in 1998. The negotiators were drawn from the parties represented in the National Assembly, and they included both Tutsi and Hutu ethnic groups. It took the mediator three years of wide consultations both within and outside Burundi to determine the representation in the talks. President Nyerere adopted the strategy used by the United Nations that recognized the formal political parties which had participated in the 1993 elections as the major protagonists who should be included in the negotiations which would eventually lead to power sharing arrangements. The main weakness of this strategy was its failure to realize that the political and military terrain had changed significantly since 1993. The continued exclusion of Hutu-dominated armed groups like the now ruling Council for the defense of Democracy (CNDD) and the Forces for National Liberation (Palipehutu-FNL), which appealed to the Hutu majority's quest for resistance against what they considered a minority Tutsi ruling oligarchy, was a mistake. Thus, the war continued even after the talks began.

### **3. Nelson Mandela takes over**

In December 1999, after the death of President Nyerere, the former President of South Africa Nelson Mandela succeeded him as facilitator of the Burundi peace process. The appointment of Mandela, an icon of the apartheid struggles in South Africa and the political equivalent of an international rock star, gave the Burundi peace process the much needed international spotlight and support. Mandela also changed the approach to the negotiations, adopting a more public and forceful position vis-à-vis the parties, and he also injected financial and diplomatic resources from the South African government into the peacemaking process. His efforts led to the signing of the Arusha Peace and Renconciliation Agreement on 28 August 2000. High-profile guests including UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and eight heads of state attended the signing ceremony. However, the main armed groups CNDD-FDD and Palipehutu-FNL stayed away from the talks and violence continued.

The Arusha Agreement was a watershed accord since it directly addressed the issue of ethnicity in Burundi and devised a power-sharing arrangement that guaranteed security to the minority Tutsi and democracy to the majority Hutus. All subsequent cease-fire agreements between the government and the armed groups used the agreement as the basis for power-sharing.

### **4. Jacob Zuma as mediator**

In early 2002 the then South African Deputy President Jacob Zuma replaced President Mandela as facilitator of the Burundi peace process. He continued reporting to the regional initiative as his predecessors had done. He was given the additional mandate to broker a cease-fire agreement between the transitional government and armed groups that were still fighting. Zuma's approach to mediation was different from the strategy pursued by both presidents Nyerere and Mandela in the sense that he was more discrete in his mediation efforts, and he also directly involved the African Union and the United Nation envoys to Burundi into the talks. He realized that the armed groups in Burundi were part of the web of armed groups spanning the entire Great Lakes region. Many violent actors in the region were being supported by some regional governments. For this reason he concluded that he needed support from the entire international community to achieve a sustainable solution to the armed conflict in Burundi.

Zuma also introduced another innovation to the mediation process. He formed a technical committee of intelligence officials from Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa to provide him with strategic information on the motivation of the parties and the regional security dynamics that impacted on the talks. This committee could fulfill an early warning role within the mediator's team. Through the mediator's briefings of the Security Council its assessments of the situation in Burundi also informed the work of the United Nations. This committee was surprisingly popular with the Burundian government and the armed groups because of its perceived proximity to the mediator.

Zuma's main achievement was to bring the Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD), the largest armed group, into the talks. The inclusion of this armed

group in the talks changed the dynamics of the Burundi peace process. It created a real possibility of ending the civil war. In the early morning hours of 3 December 2002 a comprehensive cease-fire was signed.

The remaining challenge after ceasefire agreement was the absence of a credible peacekeeping force to supervise its implementation. The joint mission by Zuma and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Burundi to New York to lobby the UN Security Council led to the approval of the deployment of the United Nations Operation in Burundi (ONUB) which replaced the African Union-sanctioned African Mission in Burundi (AMIB). This was the first time the UN took over troops from another organization and gave them blue helmets or hats. Subsequently, this process has been replicated in Darfur in Sudan.

With the peacekeepers on the ground the two main challenges for the mediation team and the United Nations was organizing the elections and bringing the last rebel movement, the Palipehutu-FNL, into the talks. An electoral calendar was adopted which provided for a referendum on the new constitution on 28 February 2005 and called for local elections to be held in June 2005. A parliamentary election followed a month later. Both elections were declared free and fair by international observers, and both were won by the former rebel movement CNDD-FDD. Its leader Pierre Nkuruzinza was sworn in as new President of Burundi.

During the first phase of the peace process, the work of the three mediators was backed by the United Nations. The Security Council endorsed the agreements reached through the regional initiative, and the mediators appeared in the Council chamber for several briefings, sometimes together with the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General. When the government expressed misgivings about one of the facilitators at the United Nations, the Council gave its full backing to the mediator.

## **5. The second phase of the peace process**

The second phase of the peace process began in early 2006 when the Tanzanian government informed the regional initiative that the remaining rebel movement in Burundi, the Palipehutu-FNL, was ready to join the negotiations without preconditions. With this new development a new mediator, Charles Nqakula, the then South African Minister for Public Safety and Security, was appointed. He was given the mandate to offer to the Palipehutu-FNL 'a soft landing' by limiting himself to facilitating the negotiation of a cease-fire while at the same time avoiding to re-open the political issues the other parties had already agreed upon.

However, the Palipehutu-FNL wanted comprehensive negotiations and its leadership pointed out that the talks would not be limited to negotiating a ceasefire only. This demand caught the mediator and the International community by surprise, and a coordinated mechanism to pressurize the Palipehutu-FNL was put in place. The government of Burundi resented the Palipehutu-FNL's push for the re-opening of political issues already settled in previous agreements because of the constitutional implications such new negotiations would have.

The Palipehutu-FNL's intransigence was overcome through combined pressure from the regional initiative, the African Union and the United Nations. A summit of the regional heads of states on December 4, 2008, in Bujumbura took landmark decisions that unblocked the process. The meeting was chaired by the President of Uganda Yoweri Museveni, and it included representatives of the United Nations, the African Union and the European Union. The Bujumbura Declaration obliged the Burundians to release all political prisoners and to make 33 posts in the government available to the Palipehutu-FNL to integrate its leadership into national institutions. The Palipehutu-FNL was called upon to change its name by dropping its ethnic designation, and to move its combatants to demobilization sites.

## **6. The third phase of the peace process**

In 2006, Burundi became the first country on the agenda of the new Peacebuilding Commission, which became an actor in the peace process toward the end of the conflict. In their conversations with the conflict parties, the mediators could cite the engagement of the Peacebuilding Commission to convince the parties that the conclusion of an agreement will generate a peace dividend for their country. The Commission's decision to consider the situation in Burundi, based on the referral by the Security Council following the request by the government of Burundi, generated trust in Bujumbura that the United Nations had a compelling post-conflict strategy.

The work of the Peacebuilding Commission and the Peacebuilding Fund in Burundi have fostered the country's recovery from conflict and therefore have strengthened the country's ability to avoid a relapse into armed conflict or mass atrocities. Thus, the United Nations' peacebuilding efforts in Burundi have the effect of strengthening the capacity of state and society in Burundi to protect the population from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing (pillar II of the responsibility to protect). This action complements the earlier regional diplomacy backed by the UN Security Council, which conceptually fit into the non-coercive measures under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter falling under pillar III of the responsibility to protect.

## **7. Conclusion**

The Partnership for Peace in Burundi comprised of representatives of the regional initiative, the mediating country South Africa, the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union, France, Belgium, Norway, and the United States of America has been put in place. With Burundi moving into another election phase of the peace process in an atmosphere of relative peace, the international community is now faced with a real test case for sustaining peace in post-conflict situations through peacebuilding measures pursued through the UN Peacebuilding Commission and other frameworks to support Burundi's post-conflict recovery.



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