

The Situation in Burundi



History of the Current Situation

The area of modern day Burundi was originally settled in the 1300s by the Hutu people, an ethnic group from the region. 100 years later, in the 1400s, another ethnic group, the Tutsi arrived to the region. Over the coming 200 years a Burundian kingdom was established, eventually this kingdom was submerged into a German Colony, German East Africa. After Germany's loss in World War I, the League of Nations granted the area of modern-day Burundi to the Belgians; who would administer it until independence in 1962. Following its independence in 1962, ethnic tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi people began to heighten, especially in the

wake of Tutsi refugees fleeing from Rwanda in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Although the Tutsi were a minority in Burundi, the Belgian authorities promoted them in the power structures of the colonial administration, giving them important posts and making up much of the local security forces. This dominance of the Tutsi minority over the Hutu majority was a major grievance for the Hutu residents of Burundi. In fact, prior to colonial rule there was relative peace and harmony between Tutsi and Hutu groups who believed that they were descendants from similar people.¹ About 14% of Burundians are from the Tutsi group and 85% are from the Hutu group.²

While initially a monarchy under King Mwambutsa IV (a Tutsi) upon independence, Burundi became a dictatorship when he was deposed in 1966 by the chief of the army, Michel Micombero. Mwambutsa and Micombero were previously allies as they had worked to put down a coup staged by Hutu political parties after they won a majority in the 1965 election and the king refused to recognize their victory.³ Micombero led a Tutsi military regime that did not elevate the Hutus into positions of power and influence. After several Hutu-led rebellions that sought to kill off the Tutsi population, the Micombero regime retaliated and killed 120,000 Hutus. Micombero was deposed in 1976 and Burundi was turned into a one-party state. Ethnic violence continued for the next decade and a half with Tutsis and Hutus killing one another in reprisal attacks. Out of this chaos a new constitution was approved in a referendum in 1992 that ended one-party rule and brought free elections back.

What was initially a hopeful transition to democracy that resulted in a win for Melchior Ndadaye, a Hutu candidate, turned to disaster when he was assassinated in 1993 by Tutsi soldiers. To avenge his assassination, Hutu groups began to kill Tutsis and the cycle of violence began again. In all, 300,000 Burundians were killed. After the violence calmed down, Cyprien Ntaryamira was

¹ "Burundi violence: From Belgian Colonization to ongoing fight for democracy." *International Business Times*. <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/burundi-violence-belgian-colonisation-ongoing-fight-democracy-1500738>.

² "Burundi goes to the polls in disputed election after night of violence." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/21/burundi-election-polls-open-president-nkurunziza-violence>.

³ "Burundi profile-Timeline." *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13087604>.

appointed president, but was killed when his plane (which also killed Rwanda's president) was shot down in 1994, sparking the Rwandan Genocide. The military again seized power in 1996 and the violence continued with ceasefires falling apart in 2000 and 2001. Eventually peacekeeping forces from the African Union, which the UN took over in 2004, were successful in disarming and demobilizing armed Hutu and Tutsi groups and enforcing the 2000 ceasefire, the Arusha Accords. With the stabilization provided by the United Nations and African Union, Pierre Nkurunziza was elected President by the National Legislature. Under the Arusha Accords, a president is limited to two terms and power is supposed to alternate between Hutu and Tutsi political groups, this however has not happened as Nkurunziza has remained in power.

In order to understand the current issues plaguing Burundi, ongoing ethnic tensions, political instability and corruption, a deteriorating humanitarian situation, and economic malaise; it is crucial to understand Burundi's history. The historical cycle of violence that began under colonial administration continues to this day and will continue unless the international community can reorient Burundian society and democracy around other ideals.

Instability in Burundi

Burundi faces a multitude of issues that contribute to the nation's instability. Political corruption, electoral disputes, and the dismal economy are key concerns that must be tackled in order to stabilize the nation. Besides internal instability, Burundi is located in a precarious region, leaving it susceptible to instability to violence and humanitarian crises coming from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda.

Political Corruption

Political corruption and poor governance are leading causes of instability and conflict within countries.⁴ Burundi is currently ranked 157/180 countries for corruption by Transparency International, an NGO that tracks governmental corruption.⁵ The report notes that bribery, police violence, and embezzlement by public officials are still incredibly common throughout the country. 16% to 30% of Burundians reported to having bribed the police.⁶ Rather than committing to actual governmental reforms and strengthening anti-corruption agencies, the Burundian government has passed laws to reduce freedom of expression and harass journalists who are seeking to hold the authorities accountable.⁷ In particular, a law passed in 2013 will require journalists to reveal their sources to government officials if the government decides it is in the national interest and journalist will not be able to cover topics which might threaten the national economy.⁸ This law is clearly meant to hamper the ability of journalists to investigate governmental corruption by making potential sources less likely to talk to journalists and outlawing journalists from covering corruption.

Even if journalists were able to expose governmental corruption it would be difficult to get real accountability. Burundi's anti-corruption agencies are incredibly weak and have had their

⁴ "The economics of violence." *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/international/2011/04/14/the-economics-of-violence>.

⁵ "Burundi." *Transparency International*. <https://www.transparency.org/country/BDI>.

⁶ "People and Corruption: Africa Survey 2015." *Corruption Watch*. <https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Africa-survey-2015-Global-Corruption-Barometer.pdf>.

⁷ "Freedom of Expression at Risk in Burundi." *Transparecny Interntional*. <https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/freedom-of-expression-at-risk-in-burundi>.

⁸ *Ibid*.

independence reduced by the CNDD-FDD, a former Hutu rebel group that is the main political party in the Senate and National Assembly.⁹ The CNDD-FDD has sought to politicize both the public service and expand government control of important sectors, such as banking, in order to tip the economic power away from the Tutsis and towards the Hutus. Anti-corruption groups within Burundi are asking for the judiciary to be strengthened and for the civil service to work to root out corruption.¹⁰ Corruption contributes to a negative perception of the government by average Burundians and heightens instability in the nation.

Upcoming Elections

While governmental corruption is a lingering issue that contributes to the instability of the nation, President Nkurunziza's efforts to maintain power through fraudulent elections and constitutional changes is perhaps the greatest crisis threatening Burundi. Nkurunziza was supposed to leave power after the 2015 election but controversially argued that he could run for a 3rd term as in his first term he was elected by the legislature rather than the people.¹¹ He ultimately won the 2015 election despite its boycott by opposition parties and widespread voter intimidation and harassment. The election was marred by violence that saw scores die in the lead up to the event, the harassment of journalists, and the assassination of opposition figures.¹² Nkurunziza remains in office today and called a referendum in December of 2017 for May of 2018 that would allow him to stay in power through 2034.¹³ While he won this referendum, in another campaign with widespread voter intimidation that much of the international community refuses to recognize, Nkurunziza has promised that this term, ending in 2020, will be his last.¹⁴ ¹⁵ While it is important that elections are held in Burundi, these elections must be free and fair without suppression of alternate media sources or attacks on the opposition parties, both of which have occurred in recent elections. Moreover, while Nkurunziza has said he is going to step down in 2020, it is difficult for the international community to know if this is true or whether he will go back on his word in the future to run for another term.

Poor Economy

Burundi, as a landlocked, underdeveloped, and resource-poor country, is considered one of the poorest nations in the world. Burundi's GDP per capita is \$267 and the country ranks 180 out of 186 countries on the Human Development Index.¹⁶ The country's most important industry is farming, with coffee its main export. Coffee exports provide the livelihood of 55% of the population. This

⁹ "Burundi: A Deepening Corruption Crisis." *International Crisis Group*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/burundi/burundi-deepening-corruption-crisis>.

¹⁰ "Impunity fosters corruption in Burundi, watchdog says." *IWACU*. <http://www.iwacu-burundi.org/englishnews/impunity-fosters-corruption-in-burundi-watchdog-says/>.

¹¹ "Burundi's president Pierre Nkurunziza wins third term in disputed election." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/24/burundi-pierre-nkurunziza-wins-third-term-disputed-election>.

¹² "Burundi goes to polls in disputed election after night of violence." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/21/burundi-election-polls-open-president-nkurunziza-violence>.

¹³ "Burundi: Repression Linked to Presidential-Term Vote." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/17/burundi-repression-linked-presidential-term-vote>.

¹⁴ "Referendum in Burundi." *U.S. Department of State*. <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/05/282297.htm>.

¹⁵ "Burundi's Pierre Nkurunziza says he will step down in 2020." *Al Jazeera*. <https://bit.ly/2xn62SK>.

¹⁶ "Beyond political violence in Burundi: economy in crisis." *The Conversation*. <http://theconversation.com/beyond-political-violence-in-burundi-an-economy-in-crisis-47714>.

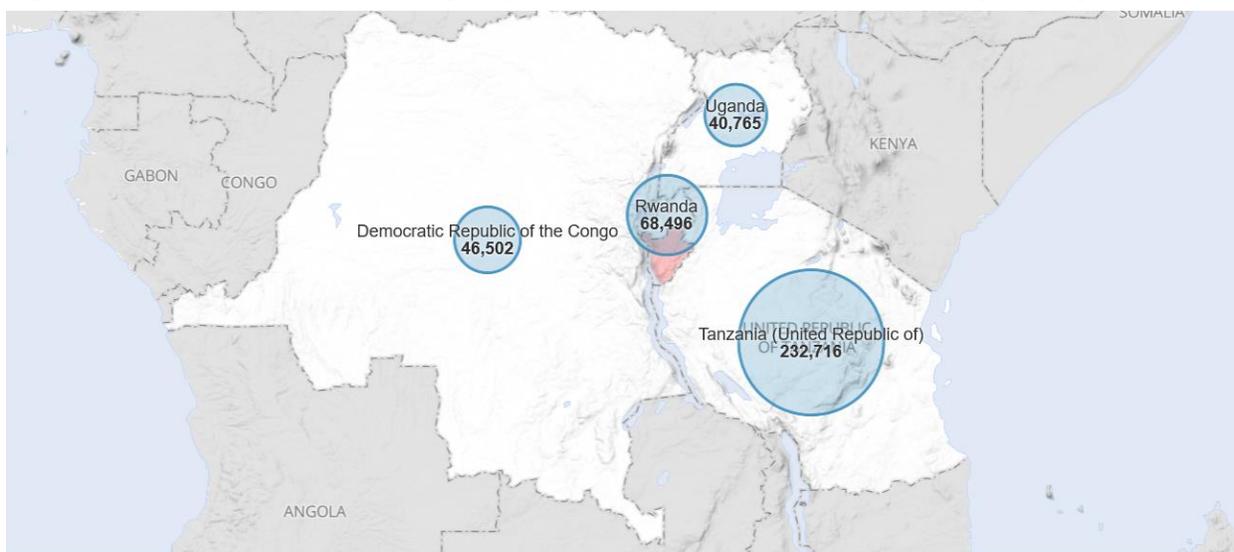
industry was hurt, however, by a World Bank-led privatization plan begun in 2008.¹⁷ This plan saw Burundians lose their share of the global coffee market and lose its role in helping refine coffee, which is where most of the money is earned in the process. However, contributing to Burundi's economic issues are its unstable political system. After Nkurunziza announced that he would run for reelection in 2015, the political violence and displacement of nearly 400,000 people saw Burundi's economy shrink by 3.9% in 2015, after having grown an average of 4.2% from 2004 to 2014.¹⁸ The displacement of Burundians internally and to neighboring nations seriously harms the economy. While underlying issues within the economy need to be addressed to lift Burundians out of systemic poverty, these efforts will not be effective unless political stability is brought to the nation as well.

Humanitarian Crisis

The dire economic conditions, breadth of government corruption, and electoral dysfunction have all contributed to a humanitarian crisis that places not only Burundians at risk but citizens in neighboring countries as well.

Refugee Crisis

As of June 30, 2018, there are over 394,000 Burundian refugees spread out among the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Rwanda.¹⁹ Situated in the already volatile Great Lakes Region of Africa, the outflow of refugees poses a further threat to stability in neighboring countries.



While these nations have worked to welcome, house and feed refugees, nearly all are nations with high rates of poverty and weak governance that makes it difficult to adequately assist Burundian refugees. In many countries tensions are sparked between native residents and new refugees, with the President of Tanzania seeking to suspend the naturalization of Burundians and force them back to Burundi.²⁰ Without a suitable solution to the crises in Burundi provoking the refugee crisis, the

¹⁷ "Burundi: UN experts warn of negative consequences of coffee privatization." *UN News*.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/04/437562-burundi-un-experts-warn-negative-consequences-coffee-privatization>.

¹⁸ "Burundi economy battered by years of political crisis: report." *News24*. <https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/burundi-economy-battered-by-years-of-political-crisis-report-20180831>.

¹⁹ "Burundi situation." *UNHCR USA*. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/burundi-situation.html>.

²⁰ "Tanzania president under fire for urging refugees to return to 'stable' Burundi." *The Guardian*. <https://bit.ly/2tRU0kB>.

international community risks spreading instability to neighboring countries. And, while the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has sought to help fund and operate refugee camps, only 21% of its required budget was met in 2017 and only 12% so far in 2018 was met. This means that food for refugees is scarcer and tensions are heightened. Many are concerned that the Burundian refugee crisis is becoming forgotten by the wider international community.²¹ NGOs, such as Oxfam, have tried to fill the gaps left by the UNHCR and limited resources of the governments, but it struggles to provide enough education classes and clean water to the Burundians.²²

Hunger Crisis

Political corruption and widespread violence have provoked a food crisis in Burundi. The nation is reliant on external donors for 58% of its food needs, but many of these donors have started donating elsewhere due to a misuse of funds and a difficulty of getting food aid to the citizens who need it because of the violence.²³ Additionally, macroeconomic mismanagement has led to long-term high inflation which makes it more difficult each year for Burundians to afford food.²⁴ Already Burundians spend up to two-thirds of their income on food, a rate that will continue to rise if inflation is not tackled. With 80% of Burundians in poverty and reliant on subsistence farming for their own food, recent heavy rainfall brought by El Niño have ruined crops throughout the nation. Even in non-El Niño years, Burundi is particularly susceptible to extreme weather conditions and natural disasters; all of which harm crops, causing food instability. As a result of these factors nearly 60% of Burundians are chronically malnourished.²⁵

Human Rights Issues

Exacerbating the refugee crisis and economic issues are a notable number of human rights violations. At the root of many of Burundi's problems is the cyclical ethnic violence between Hutus and Tutsi groups. Since Nkurunziza announced his reelection campaign in April 2015, government forces have used extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, rapes, and torture to silence anyone or group they deem a threat to their power.²⁶ These security forces have also worked to arm members of the CNDD-FDD youth wing to carry out violence and intimidation campaigns. These groups act with near complete impunity and when the government is presented with clear evidence of violence by security forces it turns a blind eye, refusing to hold the perpetrators responsible. Human rights violations become more common in the run up to elections. Before the May 2018 referendum, opponents of the constitutional reforms were hunted down and tortured or killed for their opposition.²⁷ Human rights violations continue to contribute to Burundi's instability and will continue to push Burundians to flee to other nations for safety.

²¹ "Burundi risks becoming a forgotten refugee crisis without support." *UNHCR USA*. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2018/2/5a79676a4/burundi-risks-becoming-forgotten-refugee-crisis-support.html>.

²² "Burundi refugee crisis: stops on the journey of refugees fleeing to Tanzania." *Oxfam International*. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/burundi-tanzania/burundi-refugee-crisis-stops-journey-refugees-fleeing-tanzania>.

²³ "Burundi close to 'major crisis' as hunger and disease take hold warns UNICEF." *The Guardian*. <https://bit.ly/2OCJvby>.

²⁴ "Burundi's instability drives hunger crisis." *Concern.org*. <https://www.concern.org.uk/news-blog/burundis-instability-drives-hunger-crisis>.

²⁵ "10 Facts About Conflict & Hunger in Burundi." *WFP*. <https://www.wfpusa.org/articles/10-facts-about-conflict-hunger-burundi/#>.

²⁶ "Burundi." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/burundi>.

²⁷ "Burundi: killings, Abuse Ahead of Referendum." *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/18/burundi-killings-abuse-ahead-referendum>.

International Response

United Nations

The United Nations has regularly sought to alleviate the humanitarian suffering as well as improve the nation's security and political situations. As previously noted, the United Nations has played a crucial role in trying to promote human rights and giving humanitarian aid. These efforts, however, are limited by funding constraints and intransigence by the Burundian government to work with the United Nations. Meanwhile, on the security front, the United Nations Security Council has passed a number of resolutions regarding Burundi. During the 2015 crisis Security Council Resolution 2248 was passed which urged Burundi to seek peaceful mediation for its political crisis and recalled the importance of the Arusha Agreement in preventing another civil war.²⁸ But the Security Council's involvement in Burundi goes back much further, with UN Peacekeeping forces being deployed in 2004 by Security Council Resolution 1545.²⁹ Known as the United Nations Operation in Burundi (ONUB), the peacekeepers sought to bring lasting peace through the Arusha Agreement. The operation ended in December 2006.

African Union

The African Union has been a major contributor of security personnel in Burundi as well as pressure on the Burundi government to abide by international rule of law. In the runup to the 2015 election, the African Union had taken a strong position against Nkurunziza, believing that he should not run. They even refused to send election observers because they did not believe the election would be free or fair.³⁰ With tensions rising throughout 2015, the African Union Peace and Security Council tried to send a protection force to be sent to Burundi to prevent further violence, they also gave Burundi 96 hours to allow the force into the country. Nkurunziza refused to allow them in and the African Union backed down and decided not to send the force. Despite previous contributions by the African Union to Burundi, during stabilization missions in the 1990s and early-2000s, the relationship between them has broken down.³¹

Questions to Ponder

- To what extent are current UN measures working to address the current political situation in Burundi?
- In what ways can the UNSC improve their mission in Burundi while respecting the sovereignty of Burundi?
- How should the UNSC address current violations of international law and human rights currently taking place in Burundi, if at all?
- How should the UNSC respond to the economic instability of Burundi?

²⁸ "Resolution 2248 (2015)." *United Nations Security Council*. <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2248>.

²⁹ "United Nations Operation in Burundi." *ONUB*. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/mission/past/onub/>.

³⁰ "The AU tried and failed on Burundi. Now it's time to try again." *African Argument*. <https://africanarguments.org/2016/10/10/the-au-tried-and-failed-on-burundi-now-its-time-to-try-again/>.

³¹ "The African Union and the Burundi Crisis: Ambition versus Reality." *International Crisis Group*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/burundi/african-union-and-burundi-crisis-ambition-versus-reality>.