

Burundian refugees in Tanzania face big challenges

30 August 2019, by Amelia Kuch



Refugee camp in Tanzania. Credit: Aaron Amy Tate/Flickr

[Tanzania says](#) it has reached an agreement with Burundi to begin sending back all Burundian refugees from October. The repatriation effort will take place in collaboration with the United Nations. Moina Spooner, from The Conversation Africa, asked Amelia Kuch to give some insights into the decision.

How many Burundian refugees are there in Tanzania and why did they migrate there?

Tanzania has long been held up as a [safe haven](#) for refugees in the region. There's a long history of refugees from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Mozambique seeking refuge and safety there. Burundians have been seeking refuge in Tanzania since 1960, with major waves of displacement happening in 1972, 1988, 1993, and 2015. This was due to several civil wars and genocidal violence.

The [current displacement crisis](#) started in 2015 when President Pierre Nkurunziza sought a third term in office and eventually won. Street protests

led to violent clashes. The growing fear and uncertainty pushed [over](#) 400 000 Burundians to seek refuge in neighboring countries. [About 60%](#) of them went to Tanzania.

[Interviews](#) with Burundian refugees revealed that if they were not a member of the leading party they faced violent persecution. They shared personal accounts of torture and rape by the Imbonerakure, the youth wing of the ruling party, and of disappearances and executions of family members.

There's now a total of about [342 867](#) Burundian refugees and asylum seekers in Tanzania that are mostly settled in three [refugee camps](#): Nyarugusu, Nduta and Mtendeli.

Tanzania had previously granted some Burundian refugees citizenship. Why do you think they're choosing repatriation now?

Tanzania offered citizenship, through naturalization, to 160 000 Burundian refugees. But this only benefited individuals and families who fled to Tanzania in 1972 and were settled in the three rural settlements -- Mishamo, Urambo and Katumba. It didn't include more recent arrivals.

As much as the announcement of forced repatriation is troubling, it is not surprising. Over the past 15 years Tanzania has been making moves away from acting as a host country.

The 2005 election manifesto of Tanzania's ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi, included [a pledge](#) to make Tanzania "refugee-free" by 2010. Their justification was that there wasn't enough international aid to support the camps and that the camps were having a negative impact on neighboring host communities and Tanzania's security situation.

This has already led to repatriations. In 2012

residents of Mtabila refugee camp, most of whom fled to Tanzania in the 1990s, were returned to Burundi [against their will](#) and the camp was closed.

In 2018, Tanzania pulled out of the UN's [Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework](#) – a declaration by countries to commit to respect the human rights of refugees and migrants and to support the countries that welcome them—citing a lack of international funding. The Burundian refugee situation is the [lowest funded](#) in the world. In 2018, UNHCR and its partners received just 33% of the required US\$391 million requested to support Burundian refugees.

How should the repatriation process happen?

First and foremost Burundian refugees need to be able to make an informed decision if they wish to repatriate or remain in Tanzania. It must be a voluntary decision. At the moment [it seems](#) like refugees won't be given a choice and will be forced to repatriate. Tanzanian Interior Minister Kangi Lugola announced that Tanzania will return Burundian refugees at the rate of 2 000 people a week.

Ideally, people should be allowed to travel back to Burundi to assess the situation for themselves and decide, after that initial first-hand experience, if they wish to repatriate voluntarily.

If they decide to repatriate, they should be given access to land and the ability to re-establish their livelihoods in Burundi. The support might come in the form of a financial grant, basic household items, food items, as well as financial support so they can access shelter and rent land.

Following repatriation, it's essential that the safety of refugees is monitored. Repatriation is a [political process](#) and it will be necessary to ensure that returnees are protected and can access the same rights as other citizens.

Monitoring the reintegration of returnees is a [UNHCR commitment](#) under the Tripartite Agreement from 2017 and it is critical that journalists and researchers are safe to report on

the reintegration process.

What do the prospects look like for the refugees once they're back in Burundi?

Through current and previous [research](#) I've done on Burundian refugees who repatriated and then returned to Tanzania, I've seen a complex matrix of challenges that they face. These include hunger, the inability to access land and shelter, and a shortage of medicine.

There are also safety concerns. Today the Burundian government [controls](#) the political space and refuses to engage in dialog with opposition parties. While there is less open violence, refugees still fear going back and [for some](#), that's with good reason.

With the closing migratory space in Tanzania, those who won't be able to safely stay in Burundi will have to seek other destinations of refuge.

What are Tanzania's international obligations in terms of protection of refugees?

The 1951 Refugee Convention—whose core principle asserts that a [refugee](#) should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom—has been ratified by 145 states, including Tanzania.

The Tanzanian government's decision to repatriate Burundian refugees, despite evidence that their life and freedom might be threatened in Burundi, breaches the core principle of non-refoulement.

This, however, must be seen in the global context. The decision of the Tanzanian government to expel refugees is not happening in a political void. Rather, it emulates the policies implemented by some Western countries, including the US, Australia, France, Hungary and Italy.

These countries are also breaching the Convention; by obstructing refugees from coming, putting their lives in danger and even penalizing those who try to assist refugees.

Rather than an exception, the recent decision by

the Tanzanian government to forcefully repatriate Burundian refugees is a reflection of a growing, global hostility towards refugees and other migrants.

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