

Burundi dictator keeps more than 500,000 Hutus in concentration camps

by Uwe Friesecke

A year ago, during the last week of October 1996, Ugandan, Rwandan, and Burundian troops began crossing into Kivu province of eastern Zaire, to exterminate hundreds of thousands of mainly Hutu refugees, and to bring Laurent Kabila, the puppet of the British-backed alliance between Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and Rwandan Defense Minister Paul Kagame, to power in Kinshasa. In preparation for this war, they supported Pierre Buyoya in reestablishing a dictatorship of a fanatical group of Tutsi chauvinists over Burundi. Buyoya covered the southern flank of the war in Kivu. While he may have had his own reasons for moving, in July 1996, to grab power in Bujumbura, which he had lost during the elections of the summer of 1993, it is also the case that his troops played a key role, alongside Rwandan and Ugandan killer commandos, in the extermination of Hutu refugees in Zaire during the following months.

Any idea that Buyoya would be the lesser evil, compared to his cousin Jean-Baptiste Bagaza, the other infamous Burundian dictator, has been proven to be utterly wrong. Even though Western governments keep silent about it, it is by now a well-known fact, that Buyoya bears the responsibility for the brutal assassination, on Oct. 21, 1993, of the first democratically elected President of Burundi, Melchior Ndadaye, a Hutu, who had won the elections on June 1, 1993. It took Buyoya almost three years to come back to power, but he has now integrated himself fully into the alliance of dictators organized by Museveni and Kagame.

While Buyoya played his part regionally in supporting Kagame's and Museveni's war in Zaire, he has, since the end of 1996, also moved internally in Burundi to try to crush the opposition to the rule of his group of Tutsi chauvinists. That opposition is organized around the Council for the Defense of Democracy. The CNDD was founded by friends of the assassinated President Ndadaye, under the initiative of Leonard Nyangoma, a former minister of the interior, and it has a fighting force, the Forces for the Defense of Democracy. The CNDD and the FDD enjoy very significant support from the population of Burundi, especially in the countryside. In the summer of 1996, they were beginning to encircle the capital city of Bujumbura. Buyoya's coup in July 1996, and the following war in Zaire, temporarily rolled back the earlier gains of this opposition movement. In a desperate attempt to cut it

off from the support of the population in the rural areas, Buyoya and the military began, at the end of 1996, to set up concentration camps for the majority Hutu population. It is estimated that more than 500,000 Hutus—10% of the total Hutu population of Burundi—have been chased from their land by the military and forced into those concentration camps. As in the case of the genocide perpetrated by Museveni's and Kagame's troops in Zaire, the Western governments and the United Nations have so far tolerated Buyoya's use of concentration camps to eliminate the opposition.

In a quest for a fundamental change of Western, especially U.S., policy toward Central Africa, we publish the facts about these atrocities of Pierre Buyoya and his military in Burundi today. Our information is based on reports given by Burundians living in exile, and on Amnesty International's report "Burundi Forced Relocation: New Patterns of Human Rights Abuses," of July 15, 1997. We also give those Burundians a voice, who are trying to save the legacy of the accomplishments of Melchior Ndadaye's election victory of June 1993. Christian Sendegeya, a Tutsi, was the Deputy Speaker of the Parliament, and today is the vice president of the CNDD. Perpetue Nshimirimana was Ndadaye's ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva.

The 'regroupment' camps

The first regroupment camp was already set up in February 1996, by the governor of Karuzi province. Since then, hundreds of thousands of Hutu civilians in areas of conflict between the mono-ethnic Tutsi Army and rebels, have been forced to leave their villages and hills to be "regrouped" into camps, which they are not allowed to leave without permission. Amnesty International reports that hundreds of men, women, and children have been "extrajudicially executed during the process." The Buyoya government and the Army claim that the camps were set up voluntarily and for the safety and protection of the civilian population. But why then does the military target exclusively the Hutu population for "regroupment" in these camps, and why does the "regroupment" cost so many civilian lives? According to Amnesty International, "Scores of children who could not possibly be suspected of being members of armed groups are reported to have been killed in massacres during regroupment and coun-

terinsurgency operations. Moreover, the majority of killings of civilians during counterinsurgency operations appear to have been deliberate and targeted killings, sometimes in reprisal for attacks by armed groups.”

In reality, the regime in Bujumbura is using the concentration camps as a means of warfare against the armed rebellion. Counterinsurgency operations regularly killing scores of civilians are systematically deployed by the Army to empty entire areas of the local farmer population (Hutu), to try and cut the armed rebellion off from its logistical support and recruitment base. During “regroupment,” the Army also uses those people who have been rounded up as human shields, in combat against the rebels. Of the “regrouped” Hutus, the Army regularly takes young men away from the camps, in trucks guarded by soldiers. Those young men, who are obviously potential recruits for the rebel opposition, simply “disappear.”

Once an area is cleared of the Hutu population, the Tutsi militia is regularly deployed to destroy the houses and loot the property of the former inhabitants, or else the Hutu families are forced to burn down their own houses before they leave for the camps. Once in the camps, movement of the Hutu inhabitants is restricted and in most cases it is forbidden to leave the camps at all. In contrast, there are also some displaced persons camps with predominantly Tutsi inhabitants, where movement is unrestricted.

Conditions inside the regroupment camps, where the Hutus are herded together like cattle, are so appalling, that many die of diseases and malnutrition. The camps are overcrowded, with unsanitary conditions. Sometimes converted schools are used, with up to 50 people forced into one classroom. Other camps just consist of shelters on hillsides, made of leaves and branches, offering little protection from Burundi’s difficult weather, including heavy rainfall. Epidemics of meningitis, cholera, and typhus have broken out. According to one recent report of the World Health Organization, the death rate for typhus alone is 20 people per day for each camp. The “regrouped” farmer population is systematically prevented from working their fields, sometimes completely, and at other times they are allowed only two or three days of work. In this way, malnutrition has become a major problem and, according to the World Food Program, whose representatives visited camps last January, the situation was then already “catastrophic.”

Thus, the concentration camps are also a calculated means on the part of the Buyoya regime to reduce the majority Hutu population (85%) by large numbers, in relationship to the Tutsi population (14%).

The Buyoya regime has admitted to “regrouping” 200,000 people. In reality, the number is more than 500,000. Kayanza province alone has an estimated 100,000 people “regrouped.” The size of the camps varies from several hundred to 20,000 people. A major initiative for expanding the regroupment campaign took place at the end of 1996,

when large number of collines, the local administrative units, were emptied of their inhabitants in the provinces of Karuzi, Bubanza, Cibitoke, and Ruyigi. According to the Amnesty International report, camps exist now in the following provinces of Burundi: Bubanza, Cibitoke, Kayanza, Ngozi, Muyinga, Karuzi, Gitega, Rural Bujumbura, Bururi, Makamba, and Ruyigi. This is 11 provinces out of the 15 rural provinces.

Reacting to some international protests, the Buyoya regime finally promised to resettle some 300,000 people before

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the end of 1997. The operation was supposed to begin in Kayanza province, in the north of the country. But according to latest reports from the area, the governor of this province has just suspended the program because of growing insecurity in the region. It seems to be clear, that the Buyoya regime has failed to reach the military objectives of this regroupment campaign, because the rebellion is growing, rather than declining.

Buyoya’s desperate attempt to cling to power

If Western governments did not have such a cynical approach toward politics in Africa’s Great Lakes region, harsh sanctions would have been applied a long time ago, to bring the power of Buyoya and the Tutsi chauvinists he represents, to an end. This power group in Burundi, whose roots, as members of the Bahima clan from Bururi province in the south of the country, go back to before independence, bears some of the main responsibility for the tragic history of the murderous conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi groups in the region. Their repeated uncompromising attempt to keep power entirely for themselves has, over the last 30 years, made any meaningful reconciliation between Hutu and Tutsi in Burundi impossible.

Since independence in 1961, Burundi has been ruled mainly by three Tutsi dictators, Capt. Michel Micombero (1966-76), Col. Jean-Baptiste Bagaza (1976-87), and Maj.

Pierre Buyoya (1987-93, then again since July 1996). All three come from the same clan and the same commune in southern Burundi. They are even relatives of one another. While there have been conflicts of interest among them, they have been the bearers of the tradition of suppression of the majority population by a minority group, by all means necessary.

President Micombero's regime created, in 1972, the decisive trauma for the Hutu-Tutsi conflict in Burundi and Rwanda, for the decades to come. In April 1972, up to 300,000 Hutus were killed. During this genocide of a government against its own majority population, all Hutu ministers, all Hutu high-ranking officials, civil servants, priests, nuns, businessmen, and others who could read and write, were massacred. Thanks to the governments of Micombero's followers, nobody responsible for the pogrom of 1972 has been held accountable or brought to justice.

When, in June 1993, Buyoya lost the elections to a Hutu, Melchior Ndadaye, who was head of the Frodebu party, Buyoya and his Tutsi allies acted with the same impunity as their predecessors, and deployed all means necessary to keep power in the hands of their group. First, they assassinated the elected President, Ndadaye, and those who would, by the rules of the Constitution, take over his function—Speaker of the National Assembly Pontien Karbwami and Deputy Speaker

Gilles Bimazubute—as well as many other individuals. Then they set into motion a creeping coup, which killed many of the elected members of parliament and paralyzed constitutional government. Finally, in July 1996, Buyoya was reinstalled by the military.

Especially those two events—the merciless genocide of the Hutu elite in 1972 and the assassination in 1993 of Melchior Ndadaye, who was a true symbol of hope for many, not just in Burundi, but also in the rest of Africa—had devastating effects, especially on Rwanda. It played an important role, when Rwanda sank into the horrors of 1994.

Like his powerful allies, Museveni of Uganda and Kagame of Rwanda, Buyoya has no scruples against using genocide as a means of policy. The concentration camps in Burundi today are witness to that. But it is not only the majority Hutu population in the region which is the victim. The Tutsis also will suffer without end, because in the direction that the fanatical Tutsi dictators are moving, there will be no reconciliation, but only new rounds of violence and revenge. If Western governments were not such hypocrites, they would bring pressure to bear on those dictators, to end the violence and cut them off from their supply of weapons and money, and their international recognition. In that way, Western governments could help to create the dynamic for a peaceful solution of the conflicts in Africa's Great Lakes region.

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