Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's Refworld website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the Knowledge and Information Management Unit.

BDI106060.FE

Burundi: The Imbonerakure, including their activities and their ties to the authorities, specifically with the Bujumbura police; whether they are able to find a person in all parts of the country and abroad or prevent a person from exiting the country (2015-March 2018)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

For information on the profile and origins of the Imbonerakure, see Response to Information Request BDI104343 from March 2013.

1. Overview

Numerous sources identify the Imbonerakure as being among the principal human rights violators in Burundi, together with the security forces and the National Intelligence Service (Service national de renseignement, SNR) (Human Rights Watch 18 Jan. 2018; CPI 9 Nov. 2017; UN 11 Aug. 2017, para. 82). According to data compiled by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) [1] available on its website, out of a total of 2,038 cases of violence perpetrated against civilians in Burundi, for the period from 1 January 2015 to February 2018, 608 cases involved the Imbonerakure (ACLED 17 Feb. 2018). The International Federation for Human Rights (Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l’homme - FIDH) and the the Burundian League for Human Rights (Ligue burundaise des droits de l’homme - Ligue Iteka) [2], in a report from June 2017, state that since 2016, the Imbonerakure have played an increasing role in Burundian repression and that they have become more radicalized and militarized (FIDH and Ligue Iteka June 2017, 9).

A report published in March 2017 by Belgium’s Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) indicates that [translation] “the majority of Burundian refugees interviewed by [the International Crisis Group] and other sources in 2016 reported that they fled police violence, intelligence services and, in particular, the Imbonerakure” (Belgium 31 Mar. 2017, 39). Similarly, Amnesty International states that [Amnesty International English version] “[w]hen asked why they had left Burundi, almost everyone Amnesty International spoke to both in 2016 and 2017 said that it was due to insecurity, often mentioning that it was caused by the Imbonerakure” (Amnesty International 29 Sep. 2017, 13).

1.1 Activities

Among the Imbonerakure’s activities, sources mention the following:

- murders (Human Rights Watch 18 Jan. 2018; FIDH and Ligue Iteka June 2017, 17; IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 12);
- extrajudicial executions (Human Rights Watch 18 Jan. 2018; UN 11 Aug. 2017, para. 23);
- torture (Human Rights Watch 18 Jan. 2018; UN 15 June 2017; FIDH and Ligue Iteka June 2017, 17);
• sexual violence (Human Rights Watch 18 Jan. 2018; IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 7; Amnesty International 22 Feb. 2017);
• enforced disappearances (Human Rights Watch 18 June 2018; UN 15 June 2017; FIDH and Ligue Iteka June 2017, 17);
• arbitrary arrests (Human Rights Watch 18 Jan. 2018; IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 7; UN 11 Aug. 2017, para. 23);
• arbitrary detentions (IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 12; UN 15 June 2017; FIDH and Ligue Iteka June 2017, 17);
• extortion or illegal tax collection (IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 13; FIDH and Ligue Iteka June 2017, 7; Human Rights Watch 12 Jan. 2017);
• threats and intimidation (UN 13 Nov. 2017, para. 32; IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 3);
• chants encouraging the rape of political opponents or their relatives (Human Rights Watch 18 Jan. 2018; UN 11 Aug. 2017, para. 54).

1.2 Targets

According to a May 2016 report from ACLED, most of the victims of the crisis [related to Pierre Nkurunziza running for a third presidential term in 2015] have been civilians (ACLED May 2016, 4). Numerous sources report that the civilians targeted are political opponents [of the National Council for the Defence of Democracy - Forces for the Defence of Democracy (Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie - Forces pour la défense de la démocratie, CNDD-FDD), the party in power], and members of their families (IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 7; Human Rights Watch 9 Nov. 2017). Sources point out that the Imbonerakure also attack people who are perceived to be political opponents (IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 7; UN 11 Aug. 2017, para. 14). Human Rights Watch reported in August 2015 that the Imbonerakure arrest presumed opponents whom they accuse of trying to leave the country to join an armed rebellion (Human Rights Watch 6 Aug. 2015). In November 2015, the United Nations (UN) Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) spoke of [UN English version] “hundreds of cases of arbitrary arrest and detention … targeting members of the opposition, journalists, human rights defenders and their families, people attending the funerals of those who have been killed, and inhabitants of neighbourhoods perceived to be supportive of the opposition” (UN 10 Nov. 2015). The French newspaper Le Monde reported in February 2016 that the people arrested could be [translation] “former protest leaders, potential members of armed cells, or anyone having the misfortune to arouse suspicion at a roadblock” (Le Monde 29 Feb. 2016).

The International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI) [3], in a report on Burundian asylum seekers’ motives for exile, states that people whose family members flee Burundi become Imbonerakure targets (IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 13). Similarly, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi reports in its final report of 2017 that [UN English version] “[s]everal members of the families of individuals who left the country have been threatened and some have been subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention or have been reported missing.” (UN 11 Aug. 2017, para. 58).

IRRI also reports that a representative of the UNHCR in Nakivale confirmed that the Imbonerakure target people who return from exile (IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 24). According to an April 2016 ACLED report, people returning from Rwanda and Tanzania were arrested or suffered mistreatment at the hands of the Imbonerakure (ACLED 8 Apr. 2016).

1.3 Impunity

According to an OHCHR report, [UN English version] “[m]ost of the human rights violations documented by OHCHR-Burundi, [allegedly] committed by members of the defence and security forces or the Imbonerakure, had not led to prosecution.” (UN 13 Nov. 2017, para. 25). According to the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016 of the US Department of State, the Imbonerakure “arrested persons with impunity, despite having no legal powers of arrest” (US 3 Mar. 2017, 1). On the subject of murders and arrests committed by state agents, including the Imbonerakure, IRRI affirms as well that, even if the people interviewed knew the identity of the perpetrators, “accountability for such crimes is extremely rare” (IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 15). Similarly, Human Rights Watch reports that “[i]ncitement to hatred, violence, and rape, particularly by the Imbonerakure, has become common in Burundi, almost always without condemnation by authorities” (Human Rights Watch 18 Jan. 2018).

For more information on the activities of the Imbonerakure, see Responses to Information Requests BDI105751 and BDI105750 from March 2017.

2. Relationships with the Authorities
The UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi stated in August 2017 that it was able to establish, in some cases, [UN English version] “the exercise of ‘effective control’ by agents of the State over some Imbonerakure” (UN 11 Aug. 2017, para. 26). According to IRRI, the Imbonerakure “regularly take over the role of state security agents and collaborate with them in committing human rights violations” (IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 4). Sources report that the security forces and the SNR collaborate with the Imbonerakure (Human Rights Watch 18 Jan. 2018; UN 11 Aug. 2017, para. 17 and 26). Similarly, the US Country Reports 2016 states that “[m]any members of the governing party’s youth militia, Imbonerakure, collaborated closely with government security forces” (US 3 Mar. 2017, 20). The US Country Reports 2016 indicates that the Imbonerakure “sometimes operated in cooperation with police, but often acted independently of any identifiable oversight” (US 3 Mar. 2017, 1). The same source indicates that Burundi’s Minister of Public Security denied to Human Rights Watch in June 2016 that the police in his country collaborated with the Imbonerakure (US 3 Mar. 2017, 4).

Articles from 2017 and 2018 published by Burundian media outlets describe arrests carried out jointly by Imbonerakure members and police officers (RPA 1 Feb. 2018; Iwacu 10 Oct. 2017). According to one of those articles, when the residents of an area in Bujumbura resist being arrested by the Imbonerakure, the latter “call agents of the ... SNR or the police directly and police or SNR vehicles come immediately” (Iwacu 10 Oct. 2017). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Ability to Track a Person Down
3.1 In Burundi

The US Country Reports 2016 indicates that Imbonerakure members often sit officially on “mixed security councils,” which are typically comprised of police, local administration and civilians (US 3 March 2017, 20). According to information provided in 2014 to Amnesty International by a former president of the Imbonerakure and the then Minister of the Interior, the purpose of the mixed security committees is to [Amnesty International English version] “oversee and report on security at the local level” (Amnesty International 29 Sep. 2017, 8). The US Country Reports 2016 also indicates that these committees, according to SOS Torture [4] and the Ligue Iteka, give them a strong role in local policing, allowing the governing party to “harass and intimidate opposition members on the local level” (US 3 Mar. 2017, 10). According to the same source, these committees “remained controversial because lines increasingly blurred between Imbonerakure members and police” (US 3 Mar. 2017, 10). According to the US Country Reports 2016, “[j]ournalists and human rights defenders accused Imbonerakure of acting as irregular security forces, using government resources to follow, threaten, and attack individuals they perceived as opposition supporters” (US 3 Mar. 2017, 20). Sources report that the Burundian authorities acknowledge that the Imbonerakure participate in the mixed security committees (Human Rights Watch 19 Jan. 2017; UN 9 Sept. 2016, para. 14). An article published by Human Rights Watch in January 2017 notes the following:

[Human Rights Watch English version]

In a five-page response to questions from Human Rights Watch, NancyNinette Mutoni, the executive secretary in charge of communication and information for the ruling party ... said ... [i]n these committees, the Imbonerakure “not only have the right but also the obligation to do surveillance and to signal all movements and suspect acts to the security forces.” (Human Rights Watch 19 Jan. 2017)


According to the May 2016 ACLED report, at the beginning of the crisis, attacks against civilians by the Imbonerakure, among others, which were more centralized in and around Bujumbura, are now occurring across Burundi:

Of all reported incidences of violence against civilians in the past year, approximately 49% occurred in provinces outside of the capital areas of Bujumbura Mairie and Bujumbura Rural. Although there is an increasing trend of Imbonerakure beating civilians in Kirundo Provinces bordering Rwanda and in Ruyigi and Makamba Provinces bordering Tanzania, more than 20% of all violence targeting civilians outside of the capital provinces in the past 12 months has occurred in Bubanza, which borders [the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)] and Lake Tanganyika to the west. (ACLED May 2016, 4)

The August 2017 IRRI report indicates that “[t]he issues of proximity and high numbers of Imbonerakure members were mentioned by several [refugee claimants]” (IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 23).
3.2 Abroad

According to Human Rights Watch, more than 400,000 Burundian refugees who fled the country since 2015 remain abroad, most in Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Human Rights Watch 18 Jan. 2018).

According to IRRI, some of the Burundian refugees who were interviewed suspected that the Imbonerakure were present in refugee camps (IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 20). The same source states the following:

A minority feared that Imbonerakure or intelligence operatives could be present in the settlement, presenting themselves as asylum seekers, but with the purpose of monitoring refugee activities. Two men told IRRI they recognised Imbonerakure who were involved in abuses against them in Burundi. A student who fled Burundi because of intimidation by Imbonerakure said he saw two Imbonerakure members who had ill-treated him in the reception centre in Nakivale. (IRRI 24 August 2017, 21)

Other sources also state that the Imbonerakure have infiltrated the refugee camps (International Crisis Group 5 Apr. 2017, 6; Belgium 31 Mar. 2017, 40). The Guardian, a British daily, reported in April 2016 that the government militias’ campaign of terror has spilled over Burundi’s borders and that thugs have infiltrated refugee camps in Tanzania and other neighbouring countries to launch attacks on exiles (The Guardian 15 Apr. 2016). According to the same source, secure areas have had to be created with the camps (The Guardian 15 Apr. 2016). An article in US magazine Foreign Policy, intitled “Fleeing Burundi Won't Protect You from its Government,” reported in November 2016 that the Imbonerakure regularly cross the border into Tanzania, where they surveil and intimidate refugees (Foreign Policy 4 Nov. 2016). The same source says that they infiltrated the humanitarian organizations that are supposed to protect the refugees (Foreign Policy 4 Nov. 2016).

For further information on the activities of the Imbonerakure in Rwanda, the DRC, Tanzania and Uganda, including their relationship with Burundian refugees, see Response to Information Request ZZZ105754 from March 2017.

4. Ability to Prevent Someone from Leaving the Country

For information on the ability to travel from Burundi to neighbouring countries, see Response to Information Request ZZZ105753 from March 2017.

ACLED reports that the Imbonerakure patrol “border areas near Rwanda to the north (primarily Kirundo and Ngozi Provinces) and Tanzania to the east (Ruyigi Province) and south (Makamba Province), and DRC to the west (Bubanza Province)” (ACLED May 2016, 7).

Sources report that people who try to cross the Burundian border to flee are arrested by the Imbonerakure (Amnesty International 29 Sept. 2017, 18; ACLED May 2016, 7). The US Country Reports 2016 states the following:

Persons who attempted to cross the border to flee violence and reach refugee camps were sometimes stopped by police, the SNR, or Imbonerakure members at border crossings and turned back. Other persons feared being arrested if they attempted to cross and remained in hiding inside the country as internally displaced persons (US 3 Mar. 2017, 22).

According to the Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Burundi, [UN English version] “[a] number of persons have been arrested, ill-treated and, in certain instances, raped at roadblocks set up by police and Imbonerakure, or solely by Imbonerakure, near the borders, particularly with Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania” (UN 11 Aug. 2017, para. 58). The CGRS reported the following in March 2017:

[translation]

According to testimony collected by the UNHCR in 2016, the authorities prevent citizens from leaving the country. Border crossings have become “filters for opponents,” according to [International Crisis Group]. Since the end of 2015, numerous sources have reported refoulements, interrogations, extortion, arrests, ill-treatment and sexual abuse by government agents and Imbonerakure members. ... Many refugees have bypassed border crossings to leave the country, according to [Refugees International] and the UNHCR (Belgium 31 Mar. 2017, 40-41).

Amnesty International reported as follows in September 2017:

[Amnesty International English version]

[Refugees and asylum seekers] described being beaten or stopped by members of the Imbonerakure as they tried to flee the country. Not all were seeking refuge but any cross-border movements, such as going into
Rwanda to sell goods at the market, could provoke suspicion that they were going to join one of the armed opposition groups. (Amnesty International 29 Sept. 2017, 17).

According to media sources, arrests tied to the Imbonerakure have taken place at the Bujumbura airport (RFI 18 Aug. 2016; RPA 14 Apr. 2016; Agence Bujumbura News 3 Nov. 2015). According to Agence Bujumbura News, a news agency [translation] “based in Europe and the Americas that publishes news on Burundi” (Agence Bujumbura News n.d.), a businessman who is [translation] “well-known in Bujumbura” was arrested by the SNR at the Bujumbura airport on 1 November 2015 as he was returning from Rwanda and was ordered to give financial support to the Imbonerakure (Agence Bujumbura News 3 Nov. 2015). In April 2016, according to Radio publique africaine (RPA), a young women, because of her family relationship with the director of a Burundian radio producer in exile, was arrested by the SNR at the Bujumbura airport as she was preparing to leave for Rwanda (RPA 14 Apr. 2016). The article notes that [translation] “beginning the day before her arrest, messages on the [WhatsApp] network were sent to young ‘Imbonerakure’ from the CNDD-FDD asking them to intercept the vehicle identified as the one in which the young woman was travelling” (RPA 14 Apr. 2016). Radio France internationale (RFI) reported in August 2016 that Burundian soldiers posted abroad decided not to return to the country at the end of their mission because they feared being arrested by the SNR and the Imbonerakure on their return, [translation] “which is what happened to a soldier at the Bujumbura airport when he returned from a mission in Central Africa” (RFI 18 Aug. 2016).

Amnesty International reported in February 2017 that people trying to flee Burundi have been beaten and raped, often by members of the Imbonerakure (Amnesty International 22 févr. 2017). Other sources indicate that women are raped by the Imbonerakure when they try to flee the country (IRRI 24 Aug. 2017, 16-17; UN 11 Aug. 2017, para. 49; Human Rights Watch 12 Jan. 2017). According to Human Rights Watch, these rapes are committed [Human Rights Watch English version] “apparently to deter them from leaving Burundi” (Human Rights Watch 12 Jan. 2017).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The ACLED collects information about political violence and protest events across Africa, Asia and the Middle East (ACLED n.d.).

[2] The Ligue Iteka, created in 1991, is the [translation] “first Burundian human rights organization to be legally recognized and to have worked openly in Burundi” (Ligue Iteka n.d.).

[3] IRRI is a nonprofit organization registered in the US, the United Kingdom and Uganda for the purpose of hearing the voices of displaced persons and communities affected by conflict (IRRI Aug. 2017, 1).

[4] SOS-Torture/Burundi is a website that fights against [translation] “serious human rights violations [in Burundi], with the support of extensive civic engagement through testimony (from victims and eye and ear witnesses). … Data is collected, treated, verified and shared with stakeholders who can potentially use their influence to put an end to these violations and prosecute the perpetrators either in Burundi or abroad” (SOSTorture/Burundi n.d.).

References


Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Associate professor working on the dynamics of conflicts in Burundi; Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l’homme, Africa bureau; historian at the Institut de recherche pour le développement who focuses on the army and post-conflict actors in Burundi; independent consultant on Burundi who has worked with numerous NGOs advocating for peace, reconciliation, security and democracy; instructor/researcher in political science in Burundi; Ligue des droits de l’homme de la région des Grands Lacs; professor of politics and international studies who focuses on the Great Lakes Region.

**Internet sites, including:** BBC; Burundian Coalition for the International Criminal Court; ecoi.net; Freedom House; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre; IRIN News; United Nations – Refworld.

Tips on how to use this search engine.