

2021 BURUNDI REFUGEE RETURN AND REINTEGRATION PLAN

January - December 2021



Cover photograph:

A young Burundian refugee washes his hands before boarding a bus with his family to voluntarily return home after living in exile in Rwanda since 2015.

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Foreword

This Joint Refugee Return and Reintegration Plan (2021) stems from a strong commitment by Burundian authorities, UNHCR, UNDP and partners to support sustainable solutions for returning refugees, in a manner that enables them to rebuild their lives with dignity and in peace. The Plan provides for the implementation of activities that empower returning refugees, enhance the resilience of both returnees and local populations in areas of return, and promote social cohesion and peaceful coexistence, thereby contributing to the stability of the Great Lakes region as a whole. Since 2017, more than 120,000 Burundians have returned to their country. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in both international and domestic movement restrictions, almost 41,000 refugees returned to Burundi in 2020 from Tanzania, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda and Kenya. This upward trend is expected to continue in 2021.

The increasing interest shown by refugees to return to Burundi, combined with the challenging context, highlights the need for innovative and long-term interventions to support returnees and host communities to achieve self-reliance and resilience. With this in mind, this strategy focuses on the implementation of livelihood projects, the search for markets for the exploitation of value chains, and the strengthening of programmes to access and improve health services, water and sanitation, education, social protection and human rights, through an inclusive, nationally led, and community-driven approach.

The Government of Burundi is working to ensure that returnees are able to re-establish themselves into their communities by promoting their economic and social integration through its institutional body, the Directorate General for Repatriation, Resettlement, Reintegration of Returnees and War-Displaced Persons. Various initiatives are being put in place, including the National Strategy for the Socio-Economic Reintegration of Disaster Victims (2017-2021) adopted by the Council of Ministers in 2017 and the National Development Plan for the period 2018-2027, which aims at a threefold objective: the legal protection of refugees repatriated to reintegration zones, the strengthening of security conditions in host communities and support for the reception process, and the national platform on the reintegration of returnees, to name but a few.

Our efforts require the cooperation and participation of a wide range of actors to sustain safe and dignified repatriation, restore individual rights at the local level, and support the strengthening of state and local structures necessary to ensure sustainable reintegration. The success of this Joint Refugee Return and Reintegration Plan (2021) will depend heavily on the mobilization of sufficient and timely funding. In conclusion, the Government of Burundi is convinced that this Plan represents an important step in the search for solutions and could set the benchmarks for longer-term development prospects benefiting both returning and local communities, who remain the driving actors throughout this process.

Chief Police Commissioner, Gen. Gervais Ndirakobuca
Minister of the Interior, Community Development And Public Security

PLANNED RESPONSE

143,000

PROJECTED RETURNS IN
2021

120,000

ASSISTED RETURNS BY
END-2020

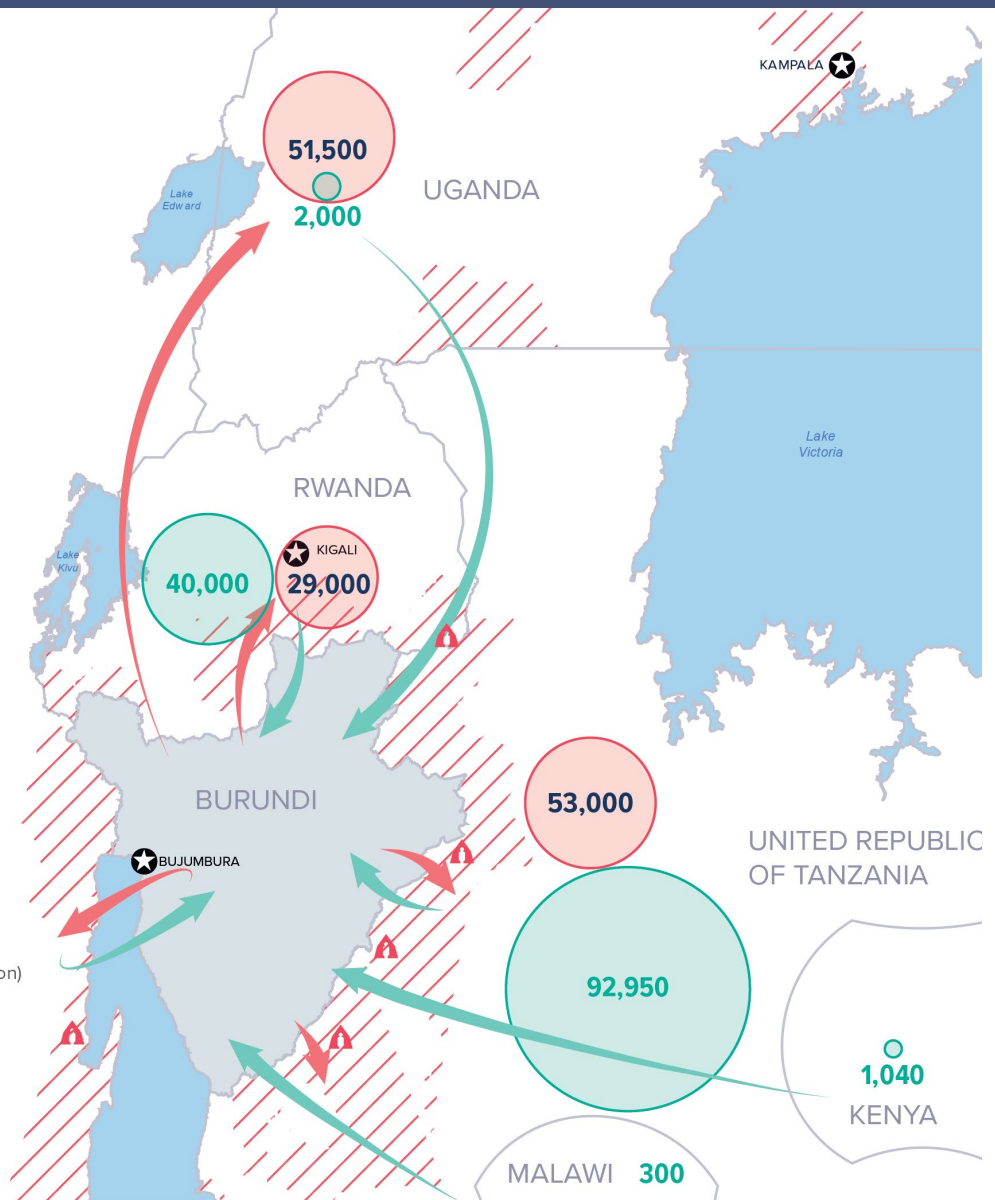
US\$ 104.3M

REQUIREMENTS FOR
2021

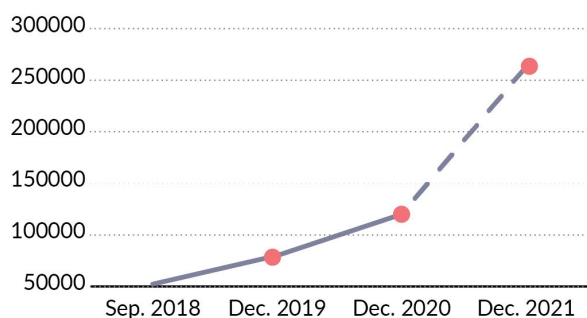


DEMOCRATIC
REPUBLIC
OF THE CONGO

- Refugees and asylum seekers (2021 projection)
- Assisted returns (2021 projection)
- ▲ Refugee camp
- ➔ Refugee crossing
- ➔ Refugee returning
- ▨ Refugee locations



Returns Trends 2018 - 2021



Introduction

The 2021 Joint Refugee Return and Reintegration Plan is an integrated inter-agency response plan, with both humanitarian and development-oriented components, designed to support the safe and dignified return home of Burundian refugees in the sub region and beyond, and to promote their resilience and sustainable reintegration. Sustainability of the refugee returns to Burundi is indispensable for national and regional security and for achieving progressive development in Burundi and the region.

Following the election of President Ndayishimiye in June 2020 and his call for Burundians living in exile to return, an increase in interest in voluntary return has been observed in various countries hosting Burundian refugees. Indeed, the relative stability that has prevailed following the elections and the peaceful political transition has provided an opportunity to pursue durable solutions for thousands of Burundian refugees in neighbouring countries and others further afield.

However, the socio-economic and political situation in Burundi continues to adversely impact the lives of Burundians. According to the Human Development Report 2020, Burundi ranks 185 out of 189 in the Human Development Index (HDI). The World Bank estimates that 75 per cent of the population lives below the poverty threshold, with youth unemployment standing at 65 per cent according to the African Development Bank. Burundi has one of the highest stunting rates in the world, estimated at 54 per cent (JANSFA 2019) and rural children are more at risk of being stunted than their urban counterparts. The refugee returnees are among the most vulnerable segments of the population and the areas they are returning to in substantial numbers, such as Makamba, Kirundo and Ruyigi, are among the poorest and chronically food and nutrition insecure provinces of Burundi. These provinces are also affected by the socio-economic impact of COVID-19. Against this backdrop, the socio-economic re-integration of up to 400,000 Burundian refugees expected to return over the next few years cannot be sustained without significant development assistance.

Besides socio-economic challenges, Burundi faces the additional complications brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ On 16 March 2020, Burundi closed its borders and the Melchior Ndadaye International Airport to prevent the spread of the virus, a measure that remained in place till 10 November 2020, when the airport was re-opened to commercial flights. Amidst the pandemic, the voluntary repatriation (VolRep) process continued uninterrupted until mid- May 2020, when it was suspended once again, in connection with the start of the electoral period. UNHCR and its partners took advantage of this pause to establish adequate COVID-19 prevention measures, control infrastructure and testing procedures for returnees upon arrival in Burundi. The VolRep activities resumed on 2 July from Tanzania, followed by Rwanda and DRC, and Uganda towards the end of the year, with considerable increases in monthly returns, averaging 7,000 individuals/month in September and November 2020.

As serious socio-economic challenges prevail in return areas, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that humanitarian and development stakeholders at provincial and communal levels work jointly to support a sustainable return and reintegration process. In addition to the right to return in safety and dignity, the returnees are entitled to the same rights as well as equal access to civil documentation, services, productive assets and opportunities as other citizens. Recognizing the importance of promoting durable reintegration, in 2017, Burundi published its National Strategy for the socio-economic reintegration of victims affected by forced displacement 2017-2021 (*Stratégie Nationale de Reintegration socio-économique des personnes sinistrées au Burundi*) that articulates the three government priorities for reintegration, namely 1) enable displaced people to have access to land and shelters upon return to the chosen areas of residency;

¹ As of November 2020, according to WHO and the Burundian Ministry of Health, Burundi has recorded a total of 689 positive cases and one death since the beginning of the pandemic.

2) provide economic opportunities with support to the local markets and job creation; and 3) allow full social cohesion with participation in community and social lives.

The international community is embracing a comprehensive approach to support Burundi's voluntary repatriation and reintegration process and the leveraging of synergies across the humanitarian-development-nexus. The 2021 JRRRP endeavours to achieve these synergies through a linkage between humanitarian and resilience/development interventions. Robust support by donors and other stakeholders is crucial to ensure the sustainable reintegration of refugee returnees who have already returned, and those who are expected to return in the coming year(s).

Background

Whereas conditions in Burundi are not yet conducive to allow for the promotion of voluntary repatriation, UNHCR is supporting Burundian refugees in the exercise of their right to return, as long as their decision is voluntary, free and informed, and that their return takes place in safety and dignity.

The 2015 political crisis slowed down the country's economic development trajectory, thereby constraining peacebuilding and social cohesion. Rising unemployment and the collapse of social services have resulted in a sharp deterioration in living conditions. In the aftermath of the political crisis, international sanctions and insecurity affected the country's economy, leading to market instability, price increases, food insecurity and supply shortages. In 2019, Burundi experienced even more frequent and severe shortages of fuel and currency, which contributed to a flourishing black market.

With a population of approximately 12 million, Burundi is one of the most densely populated countries in Africa. According to the October 2020 World Economic Outlook of the International Monetary Fund, Burundi GDP per capita stood at a meagre USD 267. The economy remains heavily reliant on agriculture, which accounts for more than a third of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Low agricultural productivity (lowest in the region) and inadequate processing and value-added capacity, combined with imbalance of trade and poor access to electricity (4 per cent) as well as aggravating climate change impacts (drought, floods, landslides and erosion) continue to slow down economic growth. Ranked 171 out of 181 countries on resilience to natural disasters and climate change, according to the *Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative*, Burundi is highly vulnerable to external shocks, such as droughts, soil erosion, landslides, floods, strong winds, torrential rains, and ensuing land disputes and conflicts.

Refugee returns and, at times, secondary displacements are exerting additional pressure in the already extremely vulnerable and fragile Burundian communities. Most refugees have returned to the provinces of Makamba, Kirundo and Ruyigi, provinces which lack the required social and economic infrastructure for a sustainable reintegration of refugee returnees. These are also the provinces with the highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and victims of natural disasters (HRP 2020) facing persistent food insecurity. The challenges faced in the areas of highest return include:

- Funding shortages for humanitarian interventions and development support;
- Concerns in connection with the fragile socio-political environment, inter-ethnic dynamics and localized violence;
- Protection concerns and needs in-transit from asylum countries;
- Specific needs of returnee women and children;
- Difficulties in tracking refugee returnees' locations to determine their protection and material assistance needs;

- Inadequate income generation schemes to enable rural populations to diversify their livelihoods and strengthen household resilience;
- Inefficient or negative coping mechanisms in the face of food insecurity;
- Scarcity of land, compounded by lack of compensation measures for expropriated families' properties, and consequent soil depletion;
- Challenges related to strengthening and upgrading education and health systems and WASH as primary basic services to ensure that returns are sustainable;
- Complications related to implementing a nuanced approach for inclusion of returnees within local and national systems; and
- Risk of onward movements or further displacement if basic services and protection are not in place in the return areas.



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