

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	204
Land:	Burundi
Kilde:	IRIN
Titel:	Cracks widen within Burundi's army
Udgivet:	12. oktober 2015
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	5. januar 2016

Cracks widen within Burundi's army

BUJUMBURA, 12 October 2015 (IRIN) - A central pillar of the peace accords that ended a civil war in Burundi a decade ago – integrating former Hutu rebels into the Tutsi-dominated army to create a more ethnically balanced force – is looking distinctly wobbly.

A recent post on a Burundi news blog by Thierry Vircoulon of the International Crisis Group (ICG) said the institution was “dangerously close to rupture.”

IRIN's interviews with more than a dozen people, including leading Burundian civilians, analysts and members of the military, indicate that a faction of former Hutu rebels has embarked on a campaign of harassing, abducting, detaining, and in some cases killing, members of the army's old guard, as well as others perceived to oppose President Pierre Nkurunziza, himself a former rebel leader.

Signed in 2000, the Arusha Accord for Peace and Reconciliation was a blueprint for sharing power in government and, with greater success, the military. Hutus make up 85 percent of the population and suffered two pogroms since independence: the first in 1965, when hundreds were murdered; then in 1972, when, after around 1,000 Tutsis were killed in a rebel attack, between 200,000 and 300,000 Hutus were slaughtered.

Various Hutu rebel groups took up arms from 1993 onwards to press for greater representation – especially in the security forces, which have been central to power in Burundi since independence from Belgium in 1962. Members of the defunct Armed Forces of Burundi (now known as ex-FAB) had almost entirely been drawn from the Tutsi minority. Ending the Tutsis' near monopoly of the army was a key component of the accord, which helped end the war six years after it was signed. By then some 300,000 people had been killed and more than half a million displaced.

“The Arusha agreement was the glue that held Burundi together,” Yolande Bouka, of South Africa's Institute for Security Studies, told the Africa Times last month.

The National Council for the Defence of Democracy-Forces for the Defence of Democracy (known by its French acronym CNDD-FDD) is Burundi's ruling party. But during the civil war it was the political and military wings, respectively, of the main Hutu rebel group. It did not sign Arusha but went on to reach a separate peace deal in 2003. This accord added key power-sharing details, such as the requirement that at least four in 10 army officers come from CNDD-FDD ranks.

Nkurunziza's bid for a third term in office, announced in April (and accomplished in a July election), was widely seen as a violation of Arusha. It prompted street protests, a heavy-handed crackdown by police, and ultimately a botched coup attempt by former intelligence chief General Godefroid Niyombare in May.

Tit-for-tat killings

There has been a spate of assassinations in recent weeks, targeting both Tutsis and Hutus in the high echelons of the military. There have also been several grenade and rocket attacks on police posts and military installations in and around Bujumbura. A month ago, army chief of staff General Prime Niyongabo narrowly escaped assassination. In late September, rockets were fired at the presidential palace.

See: Burundi's descent into hell

“There is an increased crackdown on members of ex-FAB who are accused of being behind the killings of police and army officers in Bujumbura,” Anshaire Nikoyagize, president of the Burundian League for Human Rights, told IRIN.

“It's obvious that there are divisions within the army, as evidenced by ongoing defections or desertions of serving soldiers,” added Nikoyagize, one of the few Burundian human rights activists who has not fled the country.

Patrick Ndiwimana, a Burundian journalist living in exile, described it as a purge of the old guard, of those loyal to Tutsi former president Pierre Buyoya who had opposed Nkurunziza's bid for a third term. Ndiwimana told IRIN that many ex-FAB members had been “eliminated” or forced to retire, while others had fled.

Late last month, two army officers, Major Emmanuel Ndayikeza, deputy commander of the Support Battalion for the First Military Region, an elite unit based in Bujumbura, and Colonel Edouard Nshimirimana, in charge of military transmissions and communications, absconded. Very little has been said about their whereabouts. Under the military code, they are now regarded as deserters. Sources within the army said they left with about 40 junior soldiers, together with weapons, ammunition and communications equipment.



Photo:

Desire Nimubona/IRIN

The public welcomed the army when it deployed during protests earlier this year

Regional dimensions

Burundi has openly accused neighbouring Rwanda, whose president Paul Kagame is a Tutsi, of hosting and training a new Burundian rebellion led by the coup plotters. Rwanda denies Burundi's accusation. For its part, Kigali has long complained that Burundi has turned a blind eye to, or even encouraged, the presence on its territory of members of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a rebel group led by remnants of those who carried out the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. The FDLR has since been based in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, which shares borders with both Rwanda and Burundi.

On 1 August, several Burundian opposition party and civilian leaders gathered in Addis Ababa and created the National Council for the Restoration of the Arusha Accords and the Rule of Law, with the stated aim of getting Nkurunziza out of power, by any means necessary, including, if it came to it, the use of arms.

The spokesman of Burundi's army, Col. Gaspard Baratuza, dismissed the idea of a crisis and denied widespread reports that the missing officers had joined a new rebellion.

"The army is still united and strong. Nobody can be able to cause insecurity or disturb the prevailing peace Burundians are enjoying," he told IRIN, adding that only "two or three soldiers out of 30,000 have run away."

But Thierry Vircoulon, ICG's project director for Central Africa, told IRIN the defections were clearly cause for concern because they showed the army was no longer unified. While the extent of the divisions is hard to determine, it is clear that ex-FAB soldiers have been sidelined since the failed coup in May, he added.

Many ex-FAB members of the elite Special Brigade of Institutional Protection (BSPI), which runs the security of top public officials and played a key role in putting down the coup, have recently been replaced by CNDD-FDD loyalists.

However, according to Vircoulon, there has been a bias in favour of the ruling party loyalists in the military that goes back much further than the coup.

"Whether [in regard to] training courses abroad or assignments of peacekeeping missions, former CNDD-FDD are often favoured over former ex-FAB soldiers. The army was therefore an integrated institution without actually being united."

Last month, several ex-FAB officers met Niyongabo to complain about harassment by Nkurunziza's security operatives and the police, one of those who attended the meeting told IRIN.

"When the police arrive at the home of a soldier, they ask if he is an ex-FAB or CNDD-FDD," Vital Nshimiyimana, another human rights activist, told IRIN. "If CNDD-FDD, they do not enter or come in and pretend to search. But if a former FAB, they search everywhere."

Since May, there have also been major changes in the barracks. Factions suspected of involvement in the attempted coup, namely the 11th armoured battalion and the 121st parachute battalion, were relocated at very short notice and their leaders assigned new duties. Other battalions have been phased out entirely and their mainly ex-FAB personnel ordered to join other units.

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