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TOWARD A REGIONAL SOLUTION FOR RWANDA'S RETURNING REFUGEES

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SUMMARY

- Going back as far as the 1950s, conflicts between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda have resulted in large flows of forced migration throughout East Africa.
- Understanding differences among Rwandan refugees groups is essential for developing effective management, integration and repatriation strategies.
- Rwanda's current policy response toward returnees favours groups with existing capacity for repatriation, and ignores others with lower incomes.
- Any viable national policy toward migrant reintegration must complement the regional migration approach and freedom of movement within the East African Community (EAC).

BACKGROUND

East Africa, with over two million refugees spread across the region, is major source of forced migration on the African continent. In one day alone — April 29, 1994 — over 250,000 people left Rwanda during the genocide in the largest and most sudden migration in modern history (Newbury, 2005: 258). While many refugees have returned to the country, a large number of Rwandans remain in exile, forming sizable diaspora communities across the region (International Organization for Migration, 2011).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 72,530 Rwandan refugees remain outside of the country, most of them in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The number of returnees has been increasing in the past few years, however, as the government of Rwanda encourages repatriation and conflicts in the DRC force people to move back.

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Rwanda and the UNHCR also passed a 'cessation clause' in October 2009, which requires the eventual return of all Rwandan refugees (IMO, 2011).

RWANDAN MASS MIGRATIONS IN CONTEXT

Despite these trends, Rwandan refugee populations remain diverse and difficult to categorize. Historically, mass migration has been a common phenomenon in Africa, and in the post-colonial period the main causes of movement have been political rather than economic. In Rwanda, the first wave of political migrants was largely composed of elite Tutsis who left the country with considerable education, civil experience and material resources. From 1959 to 1962, an estimated 120,000 Tutsis left for Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, and DRC, often finding administrative or commercial employment in their new host countries (Van Der Meeren, 1996: 253). Though this first wave left voluntarily — Tutsis were no longer the privileged ethnic group as under colonial rule — working class Tutsis were forced out of the country after 1962. Unlike their elite brethren, the Tutsi refugees were often excluded from host country integration and were denied political and economic rights (Newbury, 2005: 259-60).

The experiences of post-1962 refugees varied significantly depending on their host country. Those in Tanzania eventually became the most integrated, while many in DRC, Uganda and Burundi were drawn into ethnic conflicts. Unlike other host countries, Tanzania had the space and tolerance for minorities to absorb large numbers of Rwandan refugees (Van Der Meeren, 1996: 259).

In Uganda, on the other hand, Rwandan Tutsis became the sixth largest ethnic group in a densely populated country, and experienced significant political victimization for supporting movements led by Yoweri Museveni and Idi Amin (Van Der Meeren, 1996: 262; Newbury, 2005: 274). Similarly, in the Kivu provinces of DRC, Rwandans often outnumbered local populations and suffered from periodic discrimination at the hands of the Mobutu regime (Van Der Meeren, 1995: 263).

In Burundi, Tutsi refugees from Rwanda were welcomed as a reserve military force. Periodic ethnic cleansing of Burundian Hutus in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s — including the murder of the democratically elected Hutu president — only worsened relations between the two groups and resulted

in refugees from Burundi migrating to Rwanda, the DRC and Tanzania (Van Der Meeren, 1996: 264).

REFUGEE FLOWS DURING AND AFTER 1994

The most recent mass migration of Rwandans took place during the 1994 genocide and in its immediate aftermath. Most refugees were Hutus fleeing the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) military invasion and subsequent national regime change, again crossing into neighbouring DRC, Tanzania and Burundi. The experiences of these migrant groups varies depending on the host country, but collectively their reception has been the most inhospitable as many were erroneously suspected as *genocidaires*. In addition, most left Rwanda with little or no material goods and were completely dependent on support from their often inhospitable destination countries (Van Der Meeren, 1996: 263; See also Newbury, 2005: 279).

Though post-1994 Rwandan refugees have had wholly different experiences across the region, the UNHCR's 2009 cessation clause brought new problems for all Rwandans who had been forced to live abroad in East Africa. In declaring that all refugees return to their 'homeland' by June 2012, the clause has resulted in host governments threatening to close down camps forcing thousands back to Rwanda. Unsurprisingly, many refugees have resisted. The Fahamu Refugee Programme (2011) finds the cessation clause to be "a drastic measure that would strip refugees of their legal rights and expose them to forcible repatriation and the risk of persecution." After a closed-door meeting with 21 African governments in 2011, the UNHCR agreed that the cessation clause is to be extended until June 2013, providing asylum-seekers more time to lobby against their repatriation (*The Chronicles*, 2012: 3).

PERCEPTIONS OF 'HOME' AMONG RETURNING REFUGEES

When Rwandan refugees return following a mass migration period, their visions of 'home' are diverse and affect expectations of the future. Tutsi migrants that left in the early 1960s, for example, developed an idealized version of the country that clashed with local perceptions and realities when they returned. What refugees remembered as a utopia was mostly destroyed by the civil war in the 1990s. Worse still, their return was viewed

with disdain as a restoration of the privileged administrative class from a bygone colonial era (Newbury, 2005: 271-2).

Hutu returnees from the post-genocide period, however, had entirely different experiences and expectations. Those coming home after just a few years away carried fresh emotional and psychological wounds. These Rwandans also returned to a homeland in shambles, with many finding their homes, lands and belongings either destroyed or occupied (Simon, 2009: 2). They too faced suspicion from their resident compatriots, but these feelings were based on accusations and assumptions of collective guilt resulting from their perceived role in genocide (Newbury, 2005: 281).

POLICY RESPONSES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The government of Rwanda is acutely aware of its refugees and diaspora communities, and has formulated many policies surrounding these external populations. In 2007, for example, the national government created the Diaspora General Directorate (DGD), aimed at facilitating economic, political, social and cultural relationships with external groups of Rwandans. These policies reached to diaspora skills development, the international promotion of Rwandan culture and encouraging financial investment and remittances among expats (MINAFFET, 2011; *The New Times*, 2011; Workshop on Migration and Regional Integration in the East African Community, 2011: 6).

Such initiatives, however, target elite diasporas living abroad rather more recent and more resource-poor refugees. The government has also established the National Refugee Council (NRC), which is intended to assist recent returnees but does not provide technical skills training or other programs to enable socio-economic integration (IMO, 2011). This has resulted in some refugees being actively 'recruited' to return, while others are denied adequate tools to reintegrate. This point has serious implications for labour competition between returnees and local populations.

TOWARD A REGIONAL APPROACH

Recently, the issue of forcefully displaced persons in East Africa has gained in international importance because of the EAC's protocol on free movement of persons, right of residence, and the right of establishment in partner states (Rwanda, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and Burundi). Unplanned mass

migrations are not only a Rwandan problem, but an East African and one. Rwanda hosts thousands of refugees from the DRC, who face similar land and resource problems as some Rwandans do in exile (International Alert, 2010: 2, 5-6). The migration problem is historical and widespread across the region, making any one national solution unlikely to be successful. For decades, political power has been presented in ethnic terms, with governments manipulating and favouring certain groups and not others to serve its own goals. East African regimes, however, are now more aware of how easily group clashes spill across borders and threaten the security of each state. The suggested EAC political federation offers opportunities for resolving the problem of refugees (WMRI, 2011: 2), and since states in EAC share common borders, interests and migration concerns, a comprehensive regional approach is most appropriate.

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