

Update on Returns from Tanzania to Burundi Covering the period of 2 – 8 November 2019

The governments of Tanzania and Burundi announced in late August 2019 that they had signed a bilateral agreement to commence the repatriation of all Burundian refugees living in Tanzania at the rate of 2,000 people per week starting on 1 October 2019. UNHCR is not promoting returns to Burundi but is assisting those who make a free and informed choice to return voluntarily. Many refugees still have well-founded reasons for not returning at the present time and continue to be in need of international protection. UNHCR looks forward to the upcoming meeting of the Tripartite Commission in late November, to discuss concerns and seek solutions.

Latest Developments

- Since the August announcement, UNHCR has continued to assist voluntary returns to Burundi from Tanzania. Depending on the demand, two convoys are scheduled per week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays. For the most part they have been taking place only on Tuesday over the past month, however this week there were two convoys, on Tuesday and Thursday.
- On **Tuesday 5 November 2019**, a total of **249** Burundian refugees and asylum seekers, comprising **134** families departed Tanzania for Burundi. The convoy arrived at Gitara Transit center in the province of Makamba, where the handing over process was completed.
- This convoy transported 124 males, 125 females including 123 children. Of these, 35 had specific needs, including elderly people, unaccompanied and separated children, infants, single parents and people with disabilities. The majority of returns were from Mtendeli camp (124), followed by Nduta (87) and Nyarugusu (38).
- Out of the 250 refugees who repatriated, some 99 were added to the original manifest of the convoy as a result of the Government of Tanzania's mobilization efforts.
- Voluntariness interviews were conducted with all those who departed, but in some instances took place under less than ideal circumstances. Over half of the refugees and asylum seekers on this convoy (129 people) had their status inactivated during the recent validation exercise and reactivated only so that they could register for assisted return to Burundi, including 12 previously-unregistered cases.
- Returnees were transferred to 23 communes of 10 provinces in Burundi, including, Cankuzo, Ruyigi, Rutana, Gitega, Bubanza, Ngozi, Muyinga, Kirundo, Rumonge and Makamba. Most of them were from the eastern province of Ruyigi (165 individuals or 65% of the convoy).
- The Assistant Minister of Interior for the Government of Burundi who was on mission in Makamba to "re-invigorate repatriation activities," greeted Tuesday's convoy. In his address to the returnees, he welcomed their decision to return and to contribute to the development of their country. He stated that security has been restored throughout the country and appealed for the remaining refugees in Tanzania to return and to register for the forthcoming elections. He further encouraged them to live peacefully with the receiving communities in their areas of return.
- The Assistant Minister met with the partners involved in the return activities to exchange on the main repatriation challenges and the way forward. He raised concerns over the small number of Burundian refugees returning from Tanzania against the planning figure of 116,000 in 2019 but acknowledged that transit centres were rehabilitated, extended and constructed to receive 2,000 returnees per week, as agreed in the last tripartite meeting. Regarding the 15,000 Burundian asylum seekers living in refugee camps in Tanzania, he continued to refer to them as "illegal migrants" despite clarifications on the matter and also stated that both governments have agreed that they would progressively include them on the

regular repatriation convoys. The Assistant Minister informed the participants about a planned visit of governors of the provinces of return to refugee camps in Tanzania on a campaign to encourage return.

- UNHCR and its partners confirmed they will continue to support the search for durable solutions for refugees, and that generally repatriation remains the eventual best solution but stressed that returns must be voluntary. It was also highlighted that returns should not be seen only in terms of logistics but social and economic reintegration must equally be considered for a successful and sustainable return.
- Returnees cited insecurity in refugee camps, fear of enforced return in the future, deteriorating living conditions in refugee camps, prohibition of small commercial activities and closure of camp markets as the main reasons for their return. Some indicated that they wanted to join their families who had repatriated earlier.
- On **Thursday 7 November 2019**, the second convoy of the week brought another **154** Burundian refugees and asylum seekers, comprising 120 families from Tanzania to Burundi. This brought the total number of returnees since the 1st of October 2019 to **2,695** people.
- This convoy transported 82 males, 72 females including 61 children. Of these, 27 had specific needs. The returnees were from Mtendeli camp (84), followed by Nduta camp (67), and Nyarugusu (3).
- Out of the 154 refugees who repatriated, some 34 were added to the original manifest of the convoy as a result of the Government of Tanzania's mobilization efforts.
- Voluntariness interviews were conducted with all those who departed, but similarly to Tuesday's convoy took place under less than ideal circumstances. More than 70 per cent of the refugees and asylum seekers on this convoy had their status inactivated during the validation exercise and reactivated on condition of returning to Burundi, including eight previously unregistered cases. As of 07 Nov 2019, the cumulative number of refugees and asylum seekers reactivated for the purposes of voluntary repatriation stood at 918.
- After processing on Friday 8 November, returnees were transferred to 17 communes in 9 provinces in Burundi, including, Cankuzo, Citoke, Ruyigi, Rutana, Gitega, Bubanza, Ngozi, Muyinga, Kirundo, and Makamba. Most of them (73%) were from the eastern province of Ruyigi.

Advocacy and Response

- UNHCR continues to advocate with the authorities at all levels to respect the established procedures – including with respect to persons with specific needs – and ensure that all returns remain voluntary. The Regional Bureau Director travelled to Tanzania on 6-7 November to reinforce this message.
- UNHCR is supporting the efforts to organize the meeting of the Tripartite Commission with the Government of Burundi and UNHCR, scheduled for the end of November. This will provide a forum to discuss concerns and work to find solutions, to ensure that refugees who have made the informed, free and voluntary decision to return can do so in safety and in dignity.
- UNHCR and partners in Tanzania and Burundi are monitoring the situation closely on the ground and engaging in preparedness for different scenarios.
- UNHCR continues to advocate for the Ministry of Home Affairs in Tanzania and the Ministry of Interior in Burundi to expedite the formal endorsement of the Voluntary Repatriation Strategy and Operational Plan, which includes various SOPs.

Key Figures

- Tanzania currently hosts some 206,000¹ Burundian refugees and asylum seekers. Of these, 182,000 live in three camps Nduta (73,523), Nyarugusu (58,325), and Mtendeli (31,915) in the Kigoma region.
- Returns: Since September 2017, nearly 79,600 Burundian refugees have been assisted to return mainly from Tanzania, 21,168 of whom returned in 2019. The highest number of returns are to Ruyigi, Muyinga, and Makamba provinces.

¹ Following the finalization of the verification exercise that took place between July to September 2019 that was conducted in Tanzania, the overall population figure for Burundian refugees and asylum-seekers was adjusted accordingly.