

THE WOUNDS SUFFERED BY THE GREAT LAKES REGION, AND BURUNDI MORE PARTICULARLY.

The Great Lakes countries have been marked by cycles of violence, ethnic conflicts, political repression and humanitarian crises.

Burundi has suffered many social, psychological and economic wounds over the years. In observing these wounds, we noted that other countries in the region, particularly in East Africa, also suffer from similar problems, such as internal conflicts, economic crises and problems of access to basic health services. These wounds are often caused by politico-ethnic problems that heighten tensions and divides within society. We have limited ourselves to Burundi, where the wounds are still open.

Overall, we are talking about comparable situations, where challenges overlap and solutions could be shared for mutual benefit. By highlighting the specifics of Burundi, we hope to better understand its unique needs and develop effective strategies for its recovery and development.

1. Burundi suffers from long-standing wounds:

1972 massacres: In 1972, a group of Hutus attempted to overthrow the Tutsi-dominated government. In response to this coup attempt, the government launched a violent repression directed against Hutu supporters and those who might have been directly or indirectly involved. These targeted attacks resulted in the deaths of between 100,000 and 300,000 people.

Many Hutus were forced to flee to neighbouring countries as refugees. These deep scars in Burundian society have intensified ethnic tensions between Hutus and Tutsis, influencing future conflicts in the Great Lakes region.

2. Not so old wounds 1993-2005: 1993 crisis in Burundi

In 1993, the situation in Burundi again led to massacres following the assassination of the democratically elected Hutu president, Melchior NDADAYE. Following his death, Hutus massacred ethnic Tutsis in schools, neighbourhoods, villages and just about anywhere where Hutus were in the majority.

These massacres led to retaliation, driving the country into a civil war that lasted more than 10 years and cost the lives of more than 300,000 people. The violence of 1993 deeply scarred the social structure of Burundi and reinforced ethnic divides. Since then, the survivors, their perpetrators and their descendants continue to bear the scars of the trauma they experienced. These psychological wounds, which are often deep and long-lasting,

affect not only the individuals directly involved but also subsequent generations. Painful memories and feelings of guilt and/or shame influence daily life and interpersonal relationships.

This intergenerational transmission of trauma underlines the importance of recognising and addressing these wounds to enable genuine healing and reconciliation. As a result of this crisis, many people have been forced to leave their homes.

Some have been internally displaced, living in IDP camps, while others have fled to neighbouring countries such as Rwanda, Congo, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Kenya, becoming refugees.

The ongoing crisis is preventing them from returning home, forcing them to live in precarious and uncertain conditions, whether in IDP camps or in exile in foreign countries.

The most recent wounds

1. 2015 political crisis:

- ❖ **Pierre NKURUNZIZA's third mandate:** NKURUNZIZA's decision to run for a third mandate triggered violent demonstrations and severe repression.
- ❖ **Human rights violations:** Hundreds of people were killed, thousands imprisoned, and numerous cases of torture and enforced disappearances were reported.
- ❖ **Exodus of refugees:** more than 400,000 Burundians have fled to neighbouring countries, mainly to Tanzania, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.
- ❖ **Political instability:** The crisis has led to persistent political instability and distrust between citizens and authorities.

2. Current status (until 2023)

Ongoing consequences:

- ❖ **Poverty and inequality:** The country remains one of the poorest in the world, with a large percentage of the population living below the poverty line.
- ❖ **Limited access to healthcare and education:** Health and education infrastructures are inadequate, worsening the living conditions of Burundians.
- ❖ **Ongoing human rights violations:** Reports indicate ongoing human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests and restrictions on freedom of expression.

- ❖ **Psychological trauma:** The population continues to suffer from the accumulated trauma of decades of violence, affecting mental health and general well-being.

These wounds have left deep scars on Burundian society, affecting the country's political stability, social cohesion and economic development.

IMPACT OF VERY OLD INJURIES (1972)

Individuals

- **Psychological trauma:** 1972 survivors suffer from post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety.
- **Loss of family members:** Many families lost loved ones, creating broken family dynamics and a sense of perpetual loss.
- **Displacement of refugees:** Displaced people have had to rebuild their lives in foreign countries or unfamiliar regions, often in precarious conditions.

Community

- **Ethnic tensions:** The massacres have deepened mistrust and divisions between the Hutu and Tutsi communities.
- **Political instability:** The violence has created a climate of fear and mistrust towards the government, jeopardising long-term political stability.
- **Stunted development:** The resources devoted to conflict management and aid for refugees have diverted investment from economic and social development.

IMPACT OF OLDER WOUNDS (1993-2005)

Individuals

- **Widespread violence:** Victims of the civil war, including child soldiers, bear physical and psychological scars.
- **Loss of livelihood:** The destruction of property and agricultural land has forced many families into poverty.
- **Disrupted education:** Conflict has interrupted the education of many children, reducing their future opportunities.

Community

- **Social division:** The 1993 massacres deepened ethnic divisions, making reconciliation difficult.
- **Population displacement:** Massive displacement has led to overpopulation in some areas and tensions over resources.
- **Weakening of institutions:** Conflicts have weakened state institutions, making effective governance and supply of public services difficult.

IMPACT OF MORE RECENT WOUNDS (2015 TO PRESENT)

Individuals

- **Political repression:** Those involved in demonstrations against Pierre Nkurunziza's third term in office have often been victims of arbitrary arrest, torture and 'disappearances'.
- **Exodus and refugees:** Those who fled the repression continue to live in exile, often in difficult and uncertain living conditions.
- **Psychological trauma:** The recent violence has increased stress and anxiety among the population, particularly among those directly affected by the repression.

Community

- **Humanitarian crisis:** the situation has led to a humanitarian crisis with increased needs for food aid, healthcare and housing.
- **Deterioration of human rights:** Human rights violations have weakened faith in the government and state institutions.
- **Enduring political instability:** Persistent tensions are preventing the country from making progress towards lasting peace and stability.

GENERAL IMPACT ON THE GREAT LAKES REGION.

Individuals

- **Intergenerational trauma:** Experiences of violence are passed down through generations, affecting young people who have not directly experienced conflict.
- **Poverty and inequality,** affecting access to education, health and economic opportunities.

Community

- **Reconciliation challenges:** Ethnic divisions and memories of violence make reconciliation and peace-building efforts complex and often unsuccessful.
- **Pressure on resources:** The influx of refugees and internally displaced people puts enormous pressure on the resources of host communities, leading to social and economic tensions.
- **Regional instability:** Conflicts in one Great Lakes country often have repercussions in neighbouring countries, deepening regional tensions and leading to cross-border conflicts.

The impacts of these wounds are deep and long-lasting, affecting both individuals and communities in complex and interconnected ways. Efforts at healing, reconciliation and development require holistic and sustained approaches to be effective.

MURINGANIRE Aimée Marie's testimony on wounds

1. An unrecognised person

Introduction



Ms Muringanire Aimée Marie is a Burundian citizen, widowed in 2007, with two children, a boy and a girl. Aged 51, she has been living in the Mahama refugee camp since July 2015. She fled the crisis of 2015, a crisis triggered by Pierre Nkurunziza's third term in office, deemed to be unconstitutional by most Burundians and foreigners alike.

Development

Before the crisis, Ms Muringanire worked for the Ministry of Justice as a clerk at the Bujumbura High Court. She says she experienced injustice at work because of her ethnic and political background. "As an ethnic Tutsi who was not a member of the ruling political party, I was verbally threatened by my superiors and my ethnic Hutu colleagues", she says.

Mrs Muringanire also had a plot of land that her husband, a former soldier, had left her. She earned seven hundred thousand Burundian francs a month from this plot, which was a major source of income for her and her family.

The Mutakura neighbourhood, where she used to live, became the scene of clashes between demonstrators, police and the Imbonerakure militia, and was constantly under fire. "The insecurity was growing by the day, so I decided to flee Mutakura for the Ngagara district, then the Rohero district", she explains. As the situation continued to deteriorate, she decided to flee Burundi for Rwanda with her children, crossing the border on 17 July 2015.

However, the cost of living in Rwanda was very high, so she returned to Burundi to sell her taxi and motorbike in order to meet their basic needs. "On my return, I was arrested and imprisoned in the dungeon of the national intelligence service for seven days, then in the central prison where I spent five months", she recounts. She was finally released without trial, wrongly accused of disrupting public order because she had returned from Rwanda, a country where many demonstrators and politicians had taken refuge.

Shortly after her release, she learned from a former colleague that the Minister of Justice was recommending that she be imprisoned again. At 3pm on 17 July 2017, she fled for the second time to Rwanda, joining other refugees at Mahama camp.

Her children were unable to adapt to the very difficult living conditions: inadequate and insufficient food, and work to which they were not accustomed. Mrs Muringanire, formerly a civil servant, also found it difficult to integrate into this new community. Her son began to use drugs, in particular hemp and highly alcoholic beverages. She herself began to suffer from memory problems, chronic illnesses such as diabetes, stomach problems, high blood pressure and asthma. Isolated, she felt ridiculous and useless.

Conclusion

Ms Muringanire concludes by saying that ethnic divisions are at the root of all the ills that have always plagued Burundi. She ends her account by talking about her children's uncertain future: "My children's future is uncertain, and that worries me enormously," she says with deep sadness.

Wounds and their causes

Professional and social wounds :

- **Injustice at work:** Ms Muringanire suffered injustice at work because of her ethnicity (Tutsi) and political affiliation. Not being a member of the ruling party, she was verbally threatened by her Hutu superiors and colleagues.
- **Discrimination and harassment:** Verbal threats and harassment from her superiors and colleagues caused a hostile and stressful working environment.

Physical and psychological wounds:

- **Flee and exile:** Violent clashes in her neighbourhood, Mutakura, and the constant threat of violence forced Ms Muringanire to flee several times, causing extreme stress and psychological trauma.
- **Unfair imprisonment:** She was unfairly apprehended and imprisoned, first in the National Intelligence Service dungeon and then in the Central Prison, which intensified her trauma and distress.
- **Chronic illnesses:** The difficult living conditions in the refugee camp worsened her physical health, leading to chronic illnesses such as diabetes, stomach problems, high blood pressure and asthma.

Family and social wounds:

- **Deterioration of living conditions:** The difficulty of adapting to living conditions in the refugee camp has affected her children, in particular her son who has started to use drugs.
- **Social isolation:** As a former civil servant (Judge), she found it difficult to integrate into the new refugee community, feeling isolated and devalued. When she arrived in the camp, some of the refugees hated and intimidated her, asking her to continue judging them, even though she is a refugee like them because she was a judge in Burundi. What's more, she feels ignored because she has no job, which accentuates her feeling of marginalisation.
- **Loss of land:** The potential loss of her plot, a source of income of seven hundred thousand Burundian francs a month, could cause her severe financial and emotional distress, further affecting her stability and that of her family.

2. A recognised person

Testimony on the impact of the great wounds of refugees in the countries of East Africa.

From the 1970s to the present day, the citizens of East Africa have been confronted with politico-ethnic conflicts that have often led to massive population displacements and created a humanitarian crisis with large numbers of refugees. These forced displacements are often

caused by violence, ethnic persecution and human rights violations, as well as food and economic insecurity.

For example, the genocide perpetrated against the Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994 led to the displacement of millions of people, both within the country and abroad, creating one of the most serious humanitarian crises in recent history. Similarly, the conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo have also generated massive flows of refugees to neighbouring East African countries such as Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. The recent political conflicts in Burundi have also caused the massive displacement of several hundred thousand people to neighbouring countries.

Refugees fleeing politico-ethnic conflicts in East Africa often face difficult living conditions in refugee camps, where they may be exposed to malnutrition, disease, violence and other dangers.

A range of socio-psychological impacts are then observed as a result of the traumatic events they have experienced: for example :

1. **Mental health disorders:** Some refugees suffer from various mental health disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety. These conditions are caused by traumatic experiences in their country of origin, during flight and in refugee camps.
2. **Difficulties in adapting:** Other refugees encounter difficulties in adapting to their new environment, including culture, language, social norms and institutional systems. There are refugees who have so far had problems integrating into this situation.
3. **Social isolation:** In many camps, refugees feel isolated and socially excluded in their host country. Understandably, this leads to feelings of loneliness, distress and marginalisation.
4. **Loss of identity:** There are refugees in refugee camps in the East African region who live as stateless people. Take the case of Congolese refugees who have spent more

than 30 years in refugee camps, the Congolese government does not accept their Congolese identity. This has led to a feeling of loss of cultural identity and emotional distress.



President of the Burundian Coalition of Human Rights Defenders living in refugee camps. (CBDH/VICAR) in acronym