

Box 1.2 Peacekeeping to Peacebuilding: Burundi—A Minor Success with Major Consequences

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Burundi suffered from terrible ethnic conflict for many years, but unlike other peacekeeping “clients,” it was never a failed state. Throughout the darkest days of conflict, it had a functioning government and an army that, despite its faults, had control of the territory. What it lacked was capacity, due to extreme poverty, years of war, and the flight of people and resources.

The Burundi peace talks began in 1993 with political help from the UN, and gained steam in 1995 when former Tanzanian president Mwalimu Julius Nyerere launched the round of consultations that led to the Arusha peace process. In Arusha, the Burundian parties slowly realized they could talk to each other, but it would take eighteen months after the signing of the Arusha Agreement and intense pressure from Nelson Mandela (who had replaced Nyerere as mediator following his death), to push them into a transitional government.

Burundians always assumed there would have to be a UN peacekeeping force at some time, but it was difficult to persuade the Security Council or the senior ranks of the Secretariat that this would be realistic. South Africa therefore

pushed for the African Union’s first ever peacekeeping mission in 2003 and then for the UN to take over in 2004. By the time the UN Operation in Burundi (ONUB) arrived on the ground, the parties had been engaged on one level or another for years, and formally for the six years since 1998.

ONUB’s mandate was to ensure completion of the Arusha peace process before the end of the transitional period and the beginning of elections. It undertook a complex set of tasks to ensure security, encourage the legislative process, and improve the human rights situation, including the position of women. Support for elections became the most visible element of ONUB’s work, but only part of it. The success of the mission was due to the fact that external players—political, peacekeeping, and humanitarian—worked together in a coherent way, particularly with Burundi’s neighbors. An important challenge for the post-conflict period will be for these elements to continue to work together coherently to support the consolidation of peace.

In the process of negotiating peace, Burundians dealt courageously with issues of power and ethnicity, building

institutions that embodied an evolution away from ethnic bias and toward ethnic balance. In years of dialogue, the parties discovered that their demons diminished as they spoke to each other. In consolidating peace, Burundi’s external partners must deal equally boldly with social and economic needs, to ensure that frustration and exclusion do not draw Burundi into conflict again. Over the past decade, the world has come to better understand the link between lack of development, and conflict. Helping to set societies on a sound social and economic footing must receive the same high-level international attention as does the traditional peace and security agenda.

Hope is being placed in the UN Peacebuilding Commission, created in December 2005. Burundi has been identified as one of the commission’s first clients, making it the beneficiary of a strategic process to bring donors and international institutions together with Burundians to consolidate peace. A concerted effort to help the government meet the expectations of the population would be a strong signal to Burundi and other countries in conflict that there are gains to be made from peace.

Note: Carolyn McAskie is UN Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support, and former Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Burundi. Original article published in *International Insights* (Canadian Institute of International Affairs) 6, no. 1 (September 2006).