NEW CONFIGURATIONS – OLD NETWORKS?

The political mobilization of returnees in post-conflict transitions of the Great Lakes Region

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„Undoubtedly, mass exodus is a reflection of conflict, but it must also be seen as a catalyst for political change. As the refugee situation and the refugees themselves have influenced the evolution of political developments, so too the highly complex process of returnee reinsertion into society influences the prospects for future stability.“
(Pritchard 1996, p. 103)

I. Introduction and Background

Large numbers of refugees spilling across international borders do not merely signify a humanitarian catastrophe with serious burdens for the host country, they can also constitute a „neighborhood effect“ by spreading insecurity (Weiner 1996, p. 29).
Recently conducted research on the militarization of refugee populations (Muggah 2006; Lischer 2005; Stedman/Tanner 2003) and diaspora nationalism (Skrbiš 1999; Radtke 2005) sheds light on mobilization patterns among refugees and migrants. There have been important new insights on these phenomena as well as their significance for violent conflict and politics in the home countries. However, while refugees have been established as a relevant social category in the analysis of causes of war, there is much less systematic reference to returning refugees as actors in post-war periods. Until the 1980s there either was a common assumption that loosing the refugee status upon return means the end of the refugee cycle, or difficulties in studying returnees prevented the development of a more coherent research agenda (Allen/Morsink 1994, p. 2). Later on, academics as well as officials of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) became more concerned about the situation of refugees after return. However, today the problems of repatriation are still mainly defined in socio-economic terms. When access to land, jobs and housing are at stake, solutions by development programs or government assistance might be able to tackle the problem. This indicates that refugees are often not perceived as active agents involved in negotiating and facilitating their own return.

The overall interest of this paper is to demonstrate that as much as refugees are not simply passive aid recipients during exile they are actors with distinct interests and affiliations during and after return. Based on this approach the question explored in this paper is: what political role do returnees play in post-conflict periods? As the Pritchard quotation above shows it has increasingly be acknowledged that the return of refugees might have destabilizing consequences for ongoing peace processes (Adelman 1997, p. 9f; Crisp 1998, p. 12). However, this link has hardly been explained in terms of mobilization processes among returnees. This paper argues that the development of refugee identities and of political or military networks and organizations during years or decades of exile might strongly influence the political mobilization of returnees. The underlying expectation (rather than hypothesis) is that returnees differ from “stayees“[2] because of their refugee experience, mobilization in exile and a distinct set of common interests and social relations after return. In developing this line of reasoning, the focus is not predominantly on destabilizing activities of refugees in exile and after repatriation.

[2] This term is commonly used in the literature to refer to those persons in a country that have not fled during a recent violent conflict, but remained in their country of origin.

This work does not assume that mobilization of refugees as well as returnees is necessarily linked to militarization or political extremism. Micro-studies have shown that political activities and organizations in exile can take very different forms, sometimes building the basis for a vibrant civil society and political representation of refugee interests. Obviously, there are also numerous institutions organized around educational and productive activities in exile. These initiatives are not the focus of this paper as it concentrates on political mobilization, and thus activities that directly aim at influencing political processes (in the host and/or home country). The political implications of return could be examined in two distinct ways: either as a policy issue referring to the struggle about an adequate repatriation and reintegration plan or as an actor issue referring to returnees as an active and potentially mobilized group. As has been indicated above, the focus here is on returnees as actors while in the further course of research the aspect of refugee return as an important policy issue discussed and instrumentalized by political leaders will be taken up as well[3].

This paper is based on a "refugee" definition diverging from the 1951 Refugee Convention where the term refers to a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country..." (Convention relating to the Status of Refugees 1951, Ch. 1, Art. 1). First of all, it will more generally focus on conflict-related refugees including those that left their home country "to escape the perceived threat of violence from a conflict under way" (Adelman 2002, p. 296). Secondly, those taking up arms in exile are not *per se* excluded from the category of "refugee" in contrast to provisions in international law which determine that those resorting to violence no longer qualify for refugee status (UNHCR 2006, p. 13). However, in reality, there hardly ever is the possibility of clearly separating armed and civilian parts of refugee flows. Even UNHCR admits that individual screening during mass exoduses may be impossible. Under such condition, the organization officially considers the pragmatic approach of declaring 'group' determination of refugee status, "whereby each person in the group is considered as a refugee prima facie – in other words, in the absence of evidence to the contrary" (UNHCR 2006, p. 10). Because of this blurred differentiation and the commonly used concept of "refugee warrior" it appears reasonable to use a broader definition of "refugee" when conducting explorative research (Adelman 1998). Moreover, this paper focuses on refugees in neighbor countries of their homeland or, in this case, within the Great Lakes region.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are not included in this study because of the special national and international political consequences of cross-border migration. The underlying argument here is that borders still matter, though they might be very porous in many African countries. Borders are the line that defines who is a refugee in the first place and crossing it places people (if only formally) under the jurisdiction of a foreign country. In

[3] This will be important because this political process decides how returnees are included into the political transition and if and how their political rights are guaranteed (e.g. the right to vote).

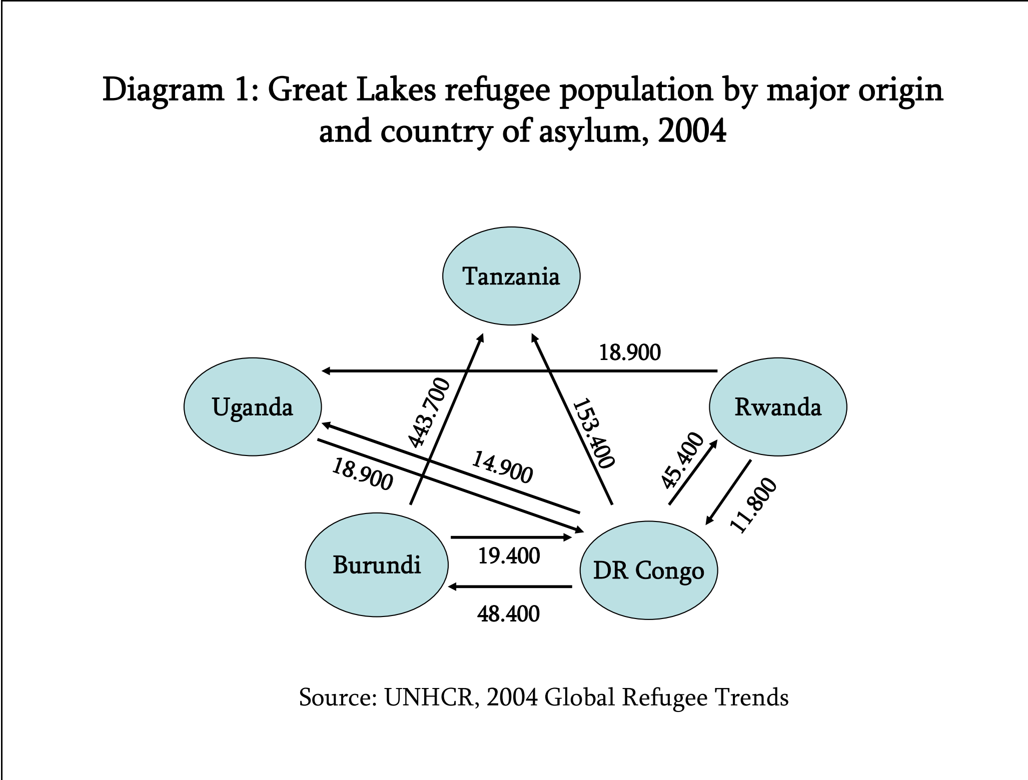
political terms, people are not only living under a different government and political system, they are excluded from their home polity – a fact that seems to be a major driving force for political action. In addition, many refugees return to their home country but not to their home community which shows the attachment to a wider identity that often is significantly reinforced in foreign exile. All these factors – including the better access to humanitarian aid abroad – do not or hardly play any role in the case of IDPs.

For assessing political mobilization and organization of returnees, it is obviously necessary to explore the consequences of refugee life and political and military activity in exile first. The common process of politicization in refugee camps will, therefore, be explored in the next paragraph before the focus shifts to return during post-conflict transitions. Overall, this paper illustrates the rationale of a dissertation project on the political mobilization of returnees in the Great Lakes region and presents first insights from secondary literature. Future research will concentrate on returnees in Burundi and the DR Congo during the latest transition period – for reasons that will be outlined at the end of the paper. However, there is hardly any literature available on repatriation to these two countries as this process only started very recently. Therefore, this paper will provide general findings on the political reintegration of returnees with no specific regional focus before some rather anecdotal evidence from the Great Lakes will be presented, drawing primarily on examples from Rwanda as there is more information available. Afterwards, the analytical framework for further research will be outlined, namely the concept of post-conflict democratization. The last paragraph of chapter III will argue that besides the overall security situation, political change has a crucial impact on refugee repatriation. Obviously at this stage of research conclusions can only be preliminary and will, therefore, be mixed with continuative questions in the final paragraph.

II. The Great Lakes Refugee Crisis: Politicization and Militarization in Exile

Indisputable, the refugee situation in the African Great Lakes over the last decades has been precarious, at times culminating into serious crisis. By 2003 nearly three quarters of 4.8 million persons of concern to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Africa were in the Great Lakes (Kamanga 2005, p. 100). In a country like Burundi the proportion of those displaced and/or scattered during the period 1993–2000 was estimated at about 50% of Burundi's inhabitants. „Of these, 600,000 were IDPs and more than 400,000 were refugees in neighboring countries, where they joined other Burundians who had fled their native country in 1972" (Boshoff / Vrey 2006, p. 3). Basically every serious outbreak of violence in the Great Lakes has produced significant refugee flows starting with tens of thousands of Tutsi from Rwanda fleeing in 1959 and culminating in the largest refugee wave of 1.2 Million (mainly Hutu) Rwandans entering DR Congo after the genocide in

1994 (Murison 2002, p. 227). In addition, all countries of the region besides Tanzania have had substantial out- as well as inflows of refugees over time as diagram 1 demonstrates.[4]



Besides the psychological and economic hardship that such massive refugee flows cause, there is rising academic awareness that refugees and displaced populations increase the risk of subsequent conflict in countries of asylum and origin (Weiner 1995; Salehyan/Gleditsch 2006). Whatever the overall explanation recent observations strongly challenge the assumption that refugees are "merely passive and de-politicized recipients of aid" (Moro 2004, p. 434). Most refugee camps around the world "are highly politicized" (ICG 1999, p. 15) and an estimated 15% of refugee crises worldwide foment militarization (Stedman/Tanner 2003, p. 3). These numbers propose that a significant part of refugee populations worldwide has been or is mobilized in pursuing political and/or military goals.

Political mobilization generally refers to a group's organization for and commitment to joint action in striving for group interests (Tilly 1978, p. 69ff). There are basically three dimensions of mobilization activities: the process of interest formation, the process of community building and finally, the process of employing means of action (Nedelmann 1987, p. 185ff). Overall, most refugee populations can be signified by a common interest and by processes of community-building as their loss of former bases of livelihood as well as of former social ties in home communities make new formations almost necessary.
In addition, the "otherness" of refugees in their host country and possible threats against them reinforce their identity as refugees. Agyeman assumes that deprivation in the country of asylum can lead to originally very diverse refugee populations developing into a

[4] This diagram does not show refugee flows, but simply the overall refugee situation in 2004 according to UNHCR sources.

coherent group that maintains itself as a separate ethnic group in exile (Agyeman 2005, p. 57). Even if refugees achieve some local integration, the risk to become a target of scape-goating in the future always remains and can strengthen community-building over longer time periods, as in the case of Rwandan Tutsi refugees in Uganda over 35 years (van der Meeren 1996, p. 265). There are numerous studies on the development of a refugee identity in exile (Malkki 1995; Bisharat 1997; Cornish et al. 1999; Kibreab 2002; Stefansson 2004b). One of the most interesting findings is that civilians and combatants among refugees can form a common group identity that "unites the two in the belief of furthering a common interest in a return under inclusive conditions in the home country" (Gerdes 2006, p. 36). This underlines that the common interest formation of refugees is most strongly defined by the ultimate goal of returning home which might explain the amazing longevity of this goal even among generations that have never known their country of origin as home (van der Meeren 1996, p. 258). Grievances are inherent to the situation of refugees, because flight "represents the exclusion of certain groups from political, economic and symbolic systems of reproduction in the home country" (Gerdes 2006, abstract).

But why do some refugees employ political or military means of action? The grievances that have just been mentioned certainly play a strong role, but are rather a necessary, not a sufficient condition for action. Studies on refugee militarization have stressed the importance of the opportunity structure. The refugee situation does not only signify a situation of loss, but also "offers a new set of resources in a new situation which can be used by innovative political entrepreneurs to establish themselves" (Zolberg et al. 1989, p. 166). These new resources are mainly defined by the policy of the receiving state towards the refugees and the availability of humanitarian aid (Gerdes 2006, p. 53f, Lischer 2005). Especially the latter factor makes collective action and political or military organization more likely in camps (Terry 2002). But beyond this material function of refugee camps, they also shape the social construction of "nationness" and identity differing from urban refugees. In the case of Burundian refugees in Tanzania, the camp had become "the spatial and the politico-symbolic site for imagining a moral and political community" (Malkki 1995, p. 16).
Apart from opportunities mainly linked to camp life, some authors add other factors influencing mobilization such as prior organizational experience (Pritchard 1996, p. 114). This factor that basically refers to the leadership component of mobilization is most obvious in so called "state-in-exile" groups, such as the Rwandan Hutu refugees in the DR Congo after the 1994 genocide. In this case, communal political structures from the home country were reestablished in the refugee camps (Murison 2002, p. 226). Such groups as well as those that have fled because of group persecution – normally including elites or educated middle-classes – are supposed to militarize more likely in exile than so called situational refugees that "merely" escape the direct threat of their personal security (Lischer 2005, p. 10).

Militarization as the most obvious form of the employment of means of action contributes to the explanation of the link between conflict (spread) and refugees and therefore has received most academic attention (Gerdes 2006; Muggah 2006; Lischer 2005; Sted-

man/Tanner 2003). This possibility of "the transformation of refugee-generating conflicts into conflict-generating refugees" (Lemarchand 1997) has been especially associated with the African Great Lakes as some of the most prominent cases are found in this region. Refugee groups as the basis of political and military activity have quite a long history here including Rwandan Tutsi refugees in Uganda since 1959, Ugandan refugees in Tanzania in the 1970s, Burundian Hutu refugees in Congo and Tanzania before and during the civil war and Rwandan Hutu refugees in Eastern Congo after 1994. There are also less well-known cases, such as the invasion of the Congolese Shaba province by Katangese refugees from Angola at the end of the 1970s (Ingham 1990, p. 168) or the recruitment of Congolese refugees in Uganda by the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (ADFL) (Murison 2002, p. 230). Some political and/or military organizations have been founded in exile, such as "Palipehutu" (Parti pour la libération du peuple Hutu) created by Burundians in Tanzania in 1980 (Turner 2004, p. 240) while others have existed before.

Looking at the conflict history and regional dynamics in the Great Lakes, these activities are without any doubt highly significant, but they are far from displaying the whole account of refugee mobilization in the region. Though findings on causes for military action by refugees are helpful for getting insights into dynamics of mobilization, it does obstruct the view on the larger process of politicization in exile. In addition to the fact that political and military action often go hand in hand under the auspice of the same organizations, there can be other forms of political activities, such as commissions for the representation of refugee interests, refugee-founded Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) for dealing with human rights abuses in camps, political parties or initiatives to influence developments at home etc. There are accounts of refugees organizing politically without employing means of military action, for example in Central America (Krznaric 1997; Pritchard 1996). But the origin and functioning of such political organizations in refugee camps has not been (sufficiently) researched for the African context.

There is another shortcoming of the strong focus on the "refugee warrior" issue, and this is that very little information is available on what happens to the militarized parts of refugee populations when they return. Looking at the extensive reference to refugees as a potential security threat in exile and to returnees as a potential source of the stabilization of peace processes, one could get the impression: when refugees flow out, they spread conflict; when they flow in, they reinforce peace. Obviously, this is a gross exaggeration, but there is indeed the tendency to speak of "refugee warriors" in exile, but of the demobilization and reintegration of (former) combatants in the course of transitions – ignoring that there might be important overlaps. More generally, there is a surprising lack of knowledge on processes of political (re)integration of returnees. The following paragraph will try to analyze conditions and consequences of refugee return with regard to political mobilization.

III. Transition and Return

When refugees return to their home country often after years or decades in exile, their reintegration into a society deeply divided by the previous conflict is generally seen as a major challenge. Most commonly, socio-economic problems linked to unclear property rights, and the subsequently difficult access of returnees to land and housing or the shortage of local resources by the arrival of former exiles are seen as sources of tension. Mainly these problems combined with sometimes insufficiently planned or funded repatriation have been identified as explanatory factors for conflicts between stayees and returnees as well as for the fact that returnees seem to be prone to recruitment by local rebel groups.

Social distance and exile networks: Political mobilization of repatriated refugees

While socio-economic differences are part of the explanation why refugees remain a distinct group even after their main goal of return has been met, several micro-studies of returnee groups have shown that there are additional features that can explain group coherence. The most important one is social change, on the one hand, within the country of origin, on the other hand, among refugees in exile. The first point means that there is no return to the status "quo ex ante" for refugees as social and political conditions at home have changed significantly in their absence (Essed et al. 2004, p. 5). The second point refers to the fact that returnees not only bring home new habits, skills and resources, they also display a distinct identity and new social relations established in exile. It has been found that returning refugees are often better off in terms of health and education as their fellow countrymen who have not have the same access to the relevant institutions during the war. More importantly, former social networks, institutions and organizations are not reconstructed by refugees but replaced with new ones (Stefansson 2004a, p. 4; Essed et al. 2004, p. 9; Kibreab 2004, p. 25, Adelman 1997, p. 4).

One major finding across most studies has been that exile changes the identity as well as social roles and networks of refugees in an enduring manner – often not in accordance with conditions at home. This caused some authors to conclude that there is no such thing as return, reconstruction or reintegration[5]. A mismatch between imagined and experienced homecoming can be observed when refugees return and are confronted with rejection or even outright hostility on the part of stayees (Stefansson 2004a, p. 8). The social distance between the groups can be based on a distorted image that stayees have of the reasons of flight and of the life of refugees abroad. The mentioned mismatch and the antagonism between the two groups might lead to the development of a distinct "returnee identity" (Cornish et al. 1999, p. 275) and – as in the case of Bosnia – to the development of separated returnee communities (Stefansson 2004b, p. 65). In some instances, returnees

[5] I go on using terms like reintegration or reconstruction, though I agree that they are partly inadequate since many refugees do not return to their original communities after repatriation or their communities (as well as themselve) have changed significantly. But these expressions are commonly used in the humanitarian field and in research on refugee issues. Thus, creating new terms would rather confuse than clarify.

are also associated with certain rebel groups by stayees and therefore, have to deal with social discrimination or exclusion (Rogge 1994, p. 40). Certainly, such developments do not automatically appear where refugees return as the case of Eritrea has shown (Kibreab 2002). However in this case, the central element that bound returnees and stayees as well as different cultural groups together was the strong national cohesion in the face of the external threat by Ethiopia. This factor is mainly attributable to Eritrea's secession and will therefore be absent in other countries that have faced long periods of intense internal warfare and violence. Especially when the conflict occurred along ethnic, religious, regional or similar lines, refugee groups are likely to be defined in these terms as well which further complicates their situation upon return.

While all the above mentioned sources of a common interest and community feeling among returnees are important for explaining why they might mobilize in a distinct way after repatriation, the opportunities need to exist as well as the previous paragraph empasized. On first sight, there is no grave difference in opportunities between returnees and stayees as they live again under the same political system governed by the same regime. As most humanitarian agencies by now make sure that not only those that fled the country, but also those who stayed benefit form their return and reintegration programs, access to aid resources is not essentially different. But it is the experience of exile that provides returnees with other opportunities. First of all, they had "access to a transnational political 'space'" meaning for example to universal discourses on human rights and secondly, they often gained organizational experience in exile through the work for relief agencies or by taking up leadership roles and political activities (Pritchard 1996, p. 125; Essed et al. 2004, p. 11; Akol 1994, p. 94). The importance of such an experience has been demonstrated in paragraph II.

Some refugees simply transfer the political structures set up in exile when they return and maintain them as the basis of their political activities at home (Krznaric 1997, p 70). This is obviously the strongest form of a special pattern of returnee mobilization and organization. Furthermore, there is the possibility that new forms of activities emerge among returnees, especially when they face political exclusion or intimidation, for example by the denial of basic citizenship rights. A third difference between the mobilization of returnees and stayees might simply be that they differ significantly in their affiliation with certain groups or parties in the new political system. As this will be very difficult to analyze on the local level due to missing data on issues like differing voting behavior between refugees and stayees, there might be a possibility to explore differences on the elite level. For example one party might be dominated by former refugees or there might be splits within parties linked to different agendas of returnees and stayees.

The latter point underlines the necessity to differentiate between the level of elites and of the "rank and file" returnees. While the elite level can be relevant for investigating the relation of returnees to state and political structures on the national level, the rank and file level mostly affects the relation of returnees and stayees on the local community level. Since both levels are crucial in a post-conflict setting and because this study is rather ex-

plorative, there can be no final restriction on one aspect at this point. The following paragraph will therefore include both levels with regard to evidence from the Great Lakes.

Refugee return and political mobilization in the Great Lakes: Some empirical observations

There is no comprehensive study on the consequences of refugee politicization or militarization in exile for mobilization after return in the Great Lakes region. However, there is an extensive literature on refugee populations, peace processes and repatriation issues from which some empirical observations can be drawn. Many accounts concentrate on Rwandan refugees –the "old caseload" Tutsi refugees in Uganda and/or the Hutu refugees fleeing the country to the DR Congo after the genocide in 1994. Both refugee flows have decisively impacted on developments in Rwanda as well as in the wider region as they actively pursued political change in their home country. However, return of these two groups (as far as it has taken place) met very different conditions. The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) is the prime example of a refugee-based rebel movement that transformed into a governing party after taking over power by military invasion. Originally, there had been a split within this refugee population between extremists aiming at the reimposition of Tutsi hegemony by force and moderates relying on the UN and the monarchy as the symbol of unity among Rwandan groups (van der Meeren 1996, p. 257). This example demonstrates that refugee populations as much as other politically relevant groups can be split into different factions or movements.[6]

In the end it was the RPF that overthrew the Hutu dominated government and ended the genocide in 1994. In the aftermath of this invasion, around 146,400 refugees including many "old caseload" refugees have returned. These were mainly Tutsi that did not feel threatened by the present government of Rwanda (AI 1996, p. 8). In contrast to this group, a large proportion of Hutu refugees – amongst them perpetrators of the genocide – hesitated or rejected return as there was widespread suspicion and hostility towards returnees from the DRC after 1994. Refugees could become victims of unlawful detentions as arrests were often conducted upon return – no matter if there was solid evidence for a person's involvement in the genocide (AI 1996, p. 17).
Parallel to this development, there occurred an increase in activities in the refugee camps driven by political demands aimed at creating the conditions for return such as power-sharing based on the Arusha Accords signed in 1993. In 1995, the Rally for the Return of Refugees and Democracy in Rwanda (RDR) was founded in Zaire claiming to represent Rwandese refugee interests. Another organization with similar demands was the Organization for the Return of Refugees to Rwanda (ORERWA-GUTAHA). The RPF government refused to start a dialogue with these groups claiming that they were linked with members of the former Rwandan Hutu army and government which was at least true for the RDR (Pottier 1996, p. 406; AI 1996, p. 32f).

[6] A study on Central America suggests that returnee communities can be equally split by different political mobilization (Krznaric 1997).

In the course of the first Congo War in 1997, the RPF and ADFL closed camps with Burundian and Rwandan refugees by force which led to the return of hundreds of thousands to their home countries while approximately 200,000 Rwandans were killed and others driven deeper into the Congolese territory (Murison, p. 228). It is largely unknown what happened to those repatriating, but one episode of military activity occurred from 1996-98 when some refugee warriors were able to return and destabilized north-western Rwanda with a wave of armed insurrection in the provinces of Ruhengeri and Gisenyi (Adelman 1997, p. 9, ICG 2002, p. 6). Besides that, the nature of the Rwandan government obviously made open political mobilization inside the country highly unlikely as returning Hutu refugees had to fear serious consequences.

The development of the RPF as a movement formed by Tutsi refugees in Uganda displays more interesting features. Numerous sources report a split within the party since 2000 when senior state officials were forced to resign and left the country: "…Tutsi politicians who are genocide survivors and Tutsi deserters of the RPF have joined the Hutu diaspora. The survivors feel they are the big losers in the RPF victory. Having lost their families during the genocide, they feel that the government response to their suffering is insufficient and they criticize the government for excluding them from power in a government dominated by English speakers" (ICG 2002, p. 6). In addition to key political figures, also Tutsi students and businessmen began to leave, seeing how the dominance of the former Ugandan diaspora impeded their activities (Rafti 2004, p. 20). There was an increasing division in the RPF between francophone and anglophone groups[7] and it seems that power has been concentrated in networks "based on a shared past in certain refugee camps in Uganda, belonging to the same schools and kinship links." (Reyntjens 2004, p. 188f). The split in the RPF should not be overemphasized, but it certainly indicates a returnee-stayee antagonism within the Tutsi governing party that has political implications on the highest level.

For other countries of the region, there is only relatively short and anecdotal evidence of splits between returnees and stayees in political terms. Ugandan returnees from Tanzania arriving in Kampala amid the fall of Idi Amin claimed to be liberators without necessarily having taken part in the invasion supported by Tanzania. Nyeko stresses that "their life style was in sharp contrast to the poor state in which the vast majority of the Ugandan citizens then lived. The social tension that all this caused within a very short period was soon self-evident." (Nyeko 1996, p 96). The Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF) was certainly an exile organization which meant that stayees had no part to play in the reconstruction of the country, as they were not "liberators" (Mutibwa 1992, p. 146). There are some even less comprehensive accounts of the role of returnees in politics after conflict. For example, the Congolese government under Laurent Kabila relied heavily on returned exiles who totally lacked an internal constituent base and therefore, were completely dependent on him (Afoaku 2002, p. 113).

[7] The language difference mainly reflects the division between those who have been in exile and those who staid inside Rwanda.

The above mentioned examples have not been systematically scrutinized with regard to the role of returning refugees in the political arena of their home country. It could therefore be rewarding to take a closer look at the current return waves to Burundi and to DR Congo. The importance of the return issue in Burundi's transition has repeatedly been demonstrated especially for the elite level, not least when Nelson Mandela sent 700 South Africans to Burundi during the first transition period to protect the returning refugee leadership. Similar to the Rwandan groups, there have been widespread political and at times military activities among Burundian exiles, mainly in refugee camps in Tanzania and DR Congo. Those refugees who fled violence in 1972 created the first organized Hutu armed groups, Palipehutu and Frolina. These movements recruited mainly from refugee camps and launched cross-border incursions against the home country since the 1980s, though they also had limited support from local populations in Burundi (ICG 1999 p. 2; Murison 2002, p. 228). It has sometimes been stated that one key factor behind Ndadaye's assassination in 1993 – leading to the outbreak of civil war – was linked to conflicts over land following the return of Hutu refugees during the transition (Lemarchand 2006, p. 25). In any case, the renewed outbreak of violence enabled Palipehutu and Frolina to once again draw considerable support from refugee populations in western Tanzania. By 1996, attacks by Frolina in the south and by Palipehutu in the north, and regular military operations by the "Forces for the Defence of Democracy" (FDD) from DR Congo had destabilized 13 out of the 15 provinces of Burundi (ICG 1999, p 3f). The consequences of the ADFL rebellion in 1996 for refugees within DR Congo have been outlined above. What seems predominantly relevant right now is what the return of about 470,000 refugees from Tanzania and tens of thousands more from other countries means for the peace process and the political transition in Burundi.

For the DR Congo, the picture is even more unclear. Here, return has more or less started after the peace agreement and the installation of the transitional government in 2003 while the first voluntary repatriation of a couple of hundred of refugees from Mozambique only took place this June (IRIN 13 June 2007). Two of the most obvious issues at the moment are about 45,000 Congolese Tutsi refugees in Rwanda, an important recruitment pool for Nkunda's rebel group, who do not return because of fear of the FDLR and Hema refugees from Uganda who are likely to claim their land back upon return, thus increasing the likelihood of local conflict (ICG 2007, p. 14f).

The role of both groups – Burundian as well as Congolese returnees – needs further exploration and research, especially since there is not much information on political activities of returnees below the elite level. The following paragraph will argue that there also is a conceptual reason to choose these two countries for future studies on the role of returnees in political transition processes.

IV. Analytical Framework for Future Research: Post-conflict Democratization

Obviously, the period after the end of violence is of major importance for the repatriation and reintegration of refugees (as well as other groups as combatants, IDPs etc.). On the one hand, refugees return because of the improvement of the overall security situation. On the other hand, host countries might intensify pressure for repatriation or even force refugees to return home after the end of fighting. There often is a strong pressure on the UNHCR to facilitate and promote the repatriation of refugees, even under rather unfavorable conditions (Chimni 2002, p. 163). For all these reasons it seems likely that a significant part of refugees returns in post-conflict periods which has been underlined by previous paragraphs as well.

But why should refugee return be studies under the condition of democratization? There are several reasons for this. First of all, a broad-based return of refugees is most likely in the course of a regime change accompanied by the opening of the political system. Especially those among the refugees associated with political or military parties have a strong incentive to return quickly after regime change in their home country when it benefits their party (PRIO Workshop Outline 2006, p. 2). Democratization that includes all major parties to the previous conflict – most likely in a negotiated arrangement – will therefore normally face more comprehensive return waves. In contrast, if that regime change is caused by the victory of one party to the conflict the effect is quite different as the example of Rwanda under the RPF has demonstrated. In divided societies, the end of conflict by military means will mean the inclusion of new groups, but the exclusion of others. Therefore, new waves of refugees become likely.

Secondly, the political transition matters as it has been widely acknowledged that democratization increases the risk that states fight wars or face internal destabilization (Mansfield/Snyder 1995; Snyder 2000). Without being the direct cause of instability the new political setting on the one hand produces great uncertainty about the power distribution, but also provides new incentives and opportunities mainly linked to political competition. Thus, the political opening makes mobilization of formerly excluded or marginalized groups such as returning refugees more likely, but also potentially more conflictual in the competition for access to power and resources.

Thirdly, in contrast to the prominence of peace processes in debates on refugee return – often evolving around the debate if refugee return is a key to successful peace processes, or even a necessary condition (Zolberg et al 1989) – the political process remains in the background. However, it is basically the (democratic) transition that defines the framework of new political configurations in post-conflict societies. While peace agreements define measures for stabilization, reintegration and reconciliation between conflict parties, their implementation depends to a great extent on the political process and actors involved in it. Looking at this conceptual background, Burundi and the DR Congo turn up

as logical cases to be examined in the course of further research within the Great Lakes region.

V. Conclusion

Looking back at the introductory quotation, the theoretical as well as analytical argument of this paper is that refugee flows should indeed be seen as catalysts for political change and seriously treated as such when large-scale return movements occur after violent conflicts. While practitioners as well as academics have extensively dealt with the link between refugees and conflict spread and the process of militarization in refugee camps, less attention has been given to non-military political activities of refugees as well as the (political) position of refugees when they return home. However, if we assume that mobilization in exile as well as return waves from exile have important implications for the stability and political development of the home country in transition, both aspects should be examined in greater detail.

This paper has argued that beyond socio-economic grievances, social change, identity and exile networks are of central importance for (most) returnees. The refugee experience has increased social distance between those returning and those that have staid and different discourses on suffering during conflict might deepen this rift. Micro-studies have shown that even where no conflict occurs between returnees and stayees, the two groups often perceive each other as different, though not necessarily in a negative sense. Since former refugees are normally better off in terms of education and training and often gained organizational experience, they also have better opportunities to organize for social or political ends. In addition, they had access to a transnational political 'space' in exile and close contact with the "international community". These special features can motivate a distinct mobilization of returnees, either based on the already established refugee organizations or along old networks and ties from exile. A third option is that returnees simply differ significantly from stayees in their affiliation with certain groups and parties in the new political system. Generally, it is necessary to differentiate between elites and rank and file members of return movements. While the relation of former refugee leaders and elites that have emerged in exile to the state and political structures at home is crucial, the mobilization of rank and file members is mainly interesting with regard to the relation of returnees and stayees on the local community level.

While single micro-studies on refugee repatriation and on returnee-stayee relations have been conducted, there is no systematic empirical evidence for the Great Lakes region on the political reintegration process of returnees. However, some observations can be drawn from the Rwandan and to a lesser degree from the Ugandan case. Refugee movements from both countries have been politicized to a large extent and there are accounts showing that distance or hostility between returnees and stayees have been common. Return has been a highly political issue in Rwanda since decades and it remains so today. While it is difficult to assess the full consequences of the (partial) return of Hutu refugees from the

DR Congo, obvious tensions have occurred within the ruling Tutsi elite along returnee-stayee lines. The RPF at the top still seems to be largely based on old networks, and the return of the diaspora has frustrated aspirations of survivors of the genocide in political as well as economic terms. The difficulty of studying political mobilization of returnees under the conditions prevailing in Rwanda with restrictions on political and civil liberty points to the important conditional factor of democratization. Though Burundi and the DR Congo might be far from stabilized democratic systems, the transitions in the two countries have included all major parties to the previous conflict with minor exceptions. Political parties have been established and in both countries presidential and parliamentary elections have taken place. Thus, returnee mobilization does not only become more likely, it will also be more visible than under rather authoritarian conditions. Therefore, this paper concludes by defining post-conflict democratization as the framework for further research on the topic. The introductory question what political role returnees play during post-conflict transition cannot be answered based on this paper. Rather new open questions emerged.

First of all, there is not much information how political and/or military organizations established in exile change when they are transferred to the home country. Secondly, there can be some doubt on distinct mobilization patterns of returnees in difference to stayees on the local level. Conflicts have certainly erupted around property disputes, but there are no reliable indications that these were caused by or have led to certain political activities – at least not in the Great Lakes region. Thirdly, it remains unclear how refugee or returnee identities relate to ethnic and other politically relevant identities. The following diagram visualizes the overall argument of returnee mobilization showing that it does not replace original group affiliations based on cultural identities, but can rather explain different mobilization patterns within one group or across groups.

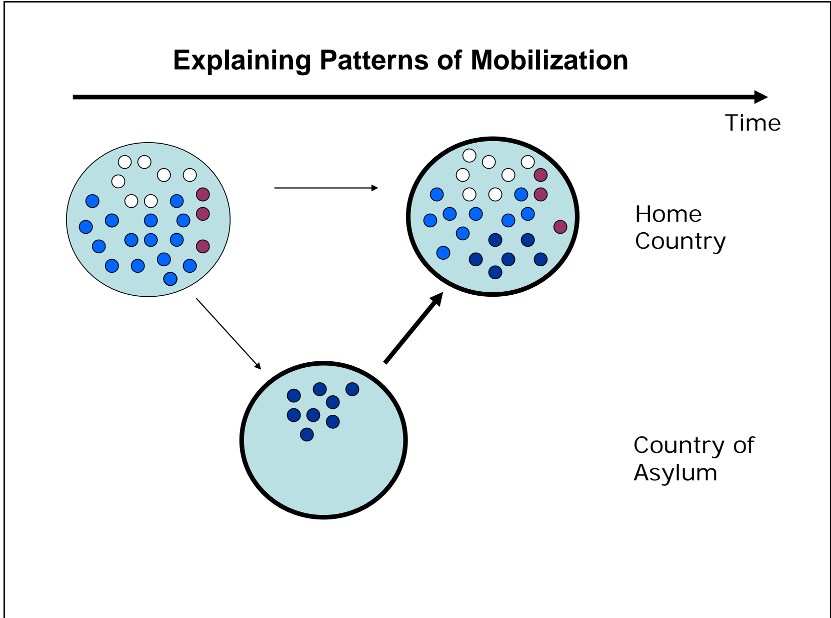


Diagram 2: Explaining Patterns of Mobilization

Violent conflicts certainly deepen existing identities, but also create new ones that are easily overlooked in the context of political transition after war. Stefansson has stressed that it is important for politicians and for international organizations to keep in mind that reintegration and reconciliation after war do not only refer to the conflict parties: "Reconciliation also involves bridging other social barriers caused or intensified by warfare, flight, and, not to forget, homecoming" (Stefansson 2004b, p. 70). What holds true for social barriers is equally valid for political ones. Therefore, it should be further investigated if and how a common identity based on refugee experience, grievances after return and the resource of old networks and mobilization from exile might have a significant impact on post-conflict transition processes.

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