

Burundi: IRIN Interview With Pierre Nkurunziza, Leader of CNDD-FDD

UN Integrated Regional Information Networks

INTERVIEW

August 23, 2004

Posted to the web August 23, 2004

Dar Es Salaam

Former rebel leader Pierre Nkurunziza, now Burundi's minister for good governance and state inspection, was in Dar es Salaam last week for a summit at which heads of state in the Great Lakes region ratified a post-transition power-sharing agreement for war-torn Burundi as well a timetable for elections. Nkurunziza, who heads what had been the largest rebel movement in the country, the Conseil national pour la defense de la democratie-Forces pour la defense de la democratie (CNDD-FDD), spoke to IRIN about his group's recent transformation into a political party and his hopes with regard to the peace process in Burundi. Here are excerpts from the interview:

Question: The regional heads of state set a timetable for elections to be held in Burundi by 31 October, do you think it is possible for elections to be organised so quickly?

Answer: Yes it is. Burundi is a small country. Registering voters and preparing voting centres could take place in just two weeks if need be. Funds have already been secured for the elections. The summit has given people the necessary moral and political support. Burundians have also experience in the electoral process. We have had three general elections since independence [from Belgium in 1962].

Q: So what was your assessment of the summit with the region's heads of state?

A: The meeting was a success. It was a follow-up to the Arusha Peace Agreement [signed by Burundian parties in August 2000 in which they agreed to create Burundi's transitional government]. The G-10 [10 Tutsi-dominated Burundian parties that on 6 August did not sign the post-transition power sharing agreement in Pretoria] tried to derail the peace process. But regional leaders still endorsed the Pretoria agreement and that is good.

Q: The summit also declared that the one rebel group still fighting in Burundi, the Forces nationales de liberation (FNL) led by Agathon Rwasa, are terrorists. What is your reaction?

A: It is clear that the FNL is not fighting for any cause. They have been given many chances to join the peace process, but they blatantly refused. The UN, the African Union, the Burundi government, the South African Government, The Netherlands and the Tanzanian Government all tried to convince the FNL to negotiate but they have refused. Their only ideology is war. The heads of state of the Great Lakes region had earlier given the FNL three months to join the peace process or face sanctions. Now, after the massacre of the [Congolese] refugees [in a Burundian camp on 13 August], the heads of state have no option but to declare the FNL a terrorist group.

Q: What impact has the massacre of the refugees had on the peace process in Burundi?

A: The FNL duped the UN representative into thinking they were ready to join the peace process. The FNL demanded that we in the CNDD-FDD remove our troops from the area around the refugee camp. When we removed them, the FNL raided the refugee camp. They killed people indiscriminately, including women and children. I think the peace process will go forward without the FNL. They are now irrelevant.

Q: This civil war has been going on for more than a decade now. What is its cause?

A: Since independence, people have wanted to rule by force. If you disagree with the ruling elites, they kill you and that's that. There has been very little tolerance or dialogue.

Q: Where were you when the 1993 civil war started in Burundi?

A: I was a lecturer at Burundi University. In 1995, the Tutsi army attacked the campus and killed 200 students. They tried to kill me too. The attackers shot at my car but I got out and ran away. They torched my car. I then joined the CNDD-FDD as a soldier. This war was forced on us; we did not start it.

Q: What was your role when you joined the CNDD-FDD?

A: I started as a soldier. In 1998 I was promoted to deputy secretary-general and became responsible for coordinating the activities of the armed and political wings of the party. I was elected CNDD-FDD chairman in 2001 and re-elected to the post this year at the party congress, which was held in Burundi on 7 and 8 August.

Q: Few people outside Burundi had heard of you before the late 1990s. Can you give us a brief background to your life?

A: I was born in Bujumbura [the capital of Burundi] on 18 December 1963. I attended primary school in Ngozi Province and secondary school in Kitenga. I graduated from the University of Burundi in 1990 where I had majored in education and sports. In fact, I was the best student in the course. I became a teacher in 1991 and continued additional studies in psychology and pedagogy. After one year I became a lecturer. I also taught at the main military college.

My father was the governor of two provinces - Ngozi and Kayansi. I was in primary school when he was killed during a genocide in Burundi in 1972. He had been a member of parliament in 1965. My father had seven children with my mother. Two were killed after the 1993 civil war started and three died while they were in the CNDD-FDD. There are now only two siblings in my family - my sister and I.

I married in 1994 and have two children, both boys aged 11 and nine. Since I left Bujumbura in 1995 to join the CNDD-FDD I had not been re-united with my family until December 2003 after signing the peace agreement [between the transitional government and the CNDD-FDD].

Q: Does the CNDD-FDD stand a chance of winning the elections [set for 31 October] if they are held as scheduled?

A: We have a very strong chance. The people of Burundi gave us food and shelter during the war. Some of them even gave up their own children to fight for the CNDD-FDD. I think the people are very much behind our party.

Q: What is your party's election manifesto?

A: We want to unite all Burundians and all political parties. There should be no more fighting. We stand for equality for all. We believe in a strong, united and prosperous Burundi where everybody lives in harmony.

Q: What type of government should Burundians expect if CNDD-FDD wins the elections?

A: If we win, we will form a coalition government; a government of national unity. Our party congress already approved this decision. In fact, all political parties want to form a coalition with the CNDD-FDD.

But we will not accept a coalition with parties that have a history of promoting exclusionist policies, which divide people on the basis of ethnicity. So far more than 60 [of the current] members of parliament in [the pro-Tutsi] UPRONA and [pro-Hutu] FRODEBU parties have joined our party. We will surprise everybody by incorporating all parties and all tribes into our government.

Q: Will you run for president?

A: Our party has not yet decided. We will decide on a presidential candidate at a later date, after the draft constitution has been endorsed and an election date set.

Q: If your party picks you as its presidential candidate, will you run?

A: If the party chooses me, I shall not betray the people [by declining].

Q: What do you do when you are not engaged in politics?

A: I play football. Actually, I used to play for Burundi's first division 'New Sporting Club'. I later became the coach of the team.

Q: Which positions do you play in football?

A: I play in attacking positions. I am a striker, so I usually prefer playing number 9 or 10. I still play football even to this day.