

Armed Violence in Burundi

CONFLICT AND POST-CONFLICT BUJUMBURA

Through the specific example of Bujumbura, this chapter tackles the issue of armed violence in cities, and in particular capital cities, during and after war. It shows how ethnic divisions and a legacy of arms proliferation and residual armed violence following a ten-year civil war have left Bujumbura lagging behind the rest of Burundi in terms of security. It draws on research carried out by the Small Arms Survey between September 2005 and June 2006 in partnership with Ligue Iteka, a Burundian human rights NGO.

The chapter examines how the civil war that raged in the country between 1993 and 2003 affected its main urban centre, Bujumbura. After providing a demographic overview of Burundi, it assesses levels of armed violence in Bujumbura and the rest of the country with the aim of understanding who commits acts of violence and with what means. The main conclusions include:

- During the war, Bujumbura was the theatre of armed violence among increasingly segregated—and armed—neighbourhoods, which caused many residents to flee the city.
- Rebel attacks on Bujumbura continued after the 2003 ceasefire and became a means for the last active rebel group to assert its bargaining power.
- Although there has been a marked improvement of the security situation in the country since 2003, this progress has been weaker in Bujumbura than in most other regions.
- Small arms left over from the conflict—particularly grenades and assault rifles—are weapons of choice for those perpetrating post-conflict violence in Burundi, including in the capital city.
- The disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process and civilian disarmament initiatives have produced mixed results. An estimated 100,000 small arms and grenades are still at large in the country.



Children receive medical attention at a centre for war victims run by MSF. © Carl De Keyzer/Magnum Photos

- Ex-combatants, few of whom decided to settle in Bujumbura, are generally not identified by the population as a source of insecurity.
- Post-conflict urban violence leads many residents of Bujumbura to keep defensive types of small arms—i.e. handguns—for self-protection.

The urban population of Burundi is growing, though it represents a much smaller portion of the population than the regional average. In terms of services available to the population, only Bujumbura and Gitega can be referred to as ‘urban’.

Improvement of the security situation since 2003 has been weaker in Bujumbura than in most other regions.

Bujumbura played an important role during the war, being the target of small, sporadic attacks or reprisals. Peripheral areas were particularly at risk from mortar attacks launched from the nearby hills. The capital was a place of recruitment for both sides. Newly enrolled combatants were rapidly trained and sent to battlefields outside the city.

Bujumbura was never really at risk of being seized by the rebels, however. One reason is that the city was well defended by the army and the population, some of whom were armed by the government to form a loose (mainly Tutsi) militia known as the Gardiens de la paix (Peace Guardians). On the rebel side, the (mainly Hutu) rebel group CNDD-FDD formed its own militia, the Militants combattants. Both militias recruited heavily in Bujumbura, where the existing segregation dramatically worsened during the war. A few displaced people have returned to their areas of origin, but, overall, Bujumbura now seems more ethnically divided than it was prior to the war.

In the 2001 peace process members of the rebel groups were allowed to choose between demobilization and integration into the new army and police. Militias were disbanded. Relatively few weapons were collected in comparison with the number of individuals demobilized, however, and about one-third of all weapons collected by the army were in such poor condition that they were unusable.

Bujumbura is the province where civilian handgun ownership is the most common.

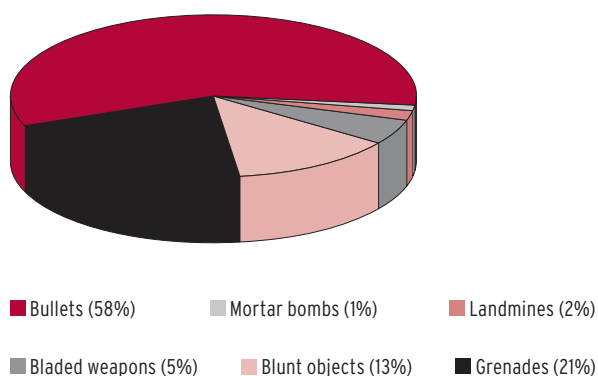
Unsurprisingly, given the many positive developments in Burundi since 2003—including the ceasefire agreement, the demobilization of combatants, and the reform of state institutions—various sources point to a relative return to security in the country in the post-conflict period. But this overall improvement extends only partially to the capital city, Bujumbura-Mairie, and to Bujumbura Rural, a province that experienced conflict up to mid-2006. Bujumbura-Mairie and Bujumbura Rural were also the provinces where small arms were most frequently used and misused, and where a greater proportion of respondents in a household survey conducted in late 2005 declared knowing at least one household member who had recently been a victim of violence.

This chapter estimates that close to 100,000 Burundian households possess at least one small arm. The capital city is the province where civilian ownership of handguns—pistols and revolvers—is the most common. In other provinces, where post-conflict

insecurity is less acute, Kalashnikovs and grenades are the main types of weapons available and appear to be left over from the conflict period.

Burundi has taken most of the steps that should allow its institutions to recover and function properly. It adopted a new constitution, held peaceful elections, restructured the army and police, and completed most DDR activities. The country has not yet emerged from its transitional period, however, and must now tackle the issue of ‘residual’ violence. If it wants to restore security in its capital city, the government will need to design strategies that not only recognize urban specificities, but also help remedy the long-standing heritage of ethnic segregation and suspicion in Bujumbura. Measures targeting small arms proliferation need to be underpinned by broader efforts to consolidate recent security gains and achieve lasting reconciliation. ▀

Figure 6.11 Violent injuries treated at the CBL by weapon type, 2004-05 (n = 1,298)



Source: MSF-Belgium (2001-05)