

# The 1972 Burundians

## INSIDE:

- 2 **Life in the Refugee Camps**
- 2 **The Need for Resettlement**
- 3 **Cultural Attributes of Burundians**
- 4 **Resettlement Considerations**
- 6 **The 1972 Burundians at a Glance**

COR Center Backgrounders provide key information about new refugee groups for U.S. resettlement workers.

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The Cultural Orientation Resource Center (COR Center) at the Center for Applied Linguistics works to increase the capacity of overseas and U.S. refugee service providers to orient refugees to their new American communities and to inform U.S. communities about refugee orientation and new refugee groups.



The United States has agreed to resettle a group of Burundian refugees who have lived in Tanzanian refugee camps since 1972. The refugees, who are not able to return safely to their homes in Burundi or settle permanently in Tanzania, were referred to the United States for resettlement consideration by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Known as the “1972 Burundians,” the group resides in three different refugee camps in Tanzania: Ngara in the north, Kibondo in the country’s central region, and Kasulu in the south. During FY 2007, the United States will resettle 2,000 to 3,000 of the refugees. An additional 4,000 to 5,000 will be resettled during FY 2008 and FY 2009.

**Who are the 1972 Burundians? Why are they being resettled in the United States? What are their cultural customs and background characteristics? What will their resettlement needs be?**

**To help domestic resettlement agency staff better understand and thus better assist the refugee newcomers, this Backgrounder looks at these questions.**

## Who Are the 1972 Burundians?

The 1972 Burundians are a group of refugees, primarily of Hutu ethnicity, who fled their homeland in mid-1972 following a campaign of violence by the Tutsi-dominated government against the Hutu population. Burundi is a small, densely populated country, bordered by the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Tanzania, that has been plagued by civil strife since it gained independence from Belgium in 1962.

Often called the first genocide in the Great Lakes region, the events of 1972 killed some 200,000 Burundians and triggered the flight of approximately 150,000 refugees to Rwanda, Tanzania, and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), with most fleeing to Tanzania. In the aftermath of the genocide, Hutu citizens in Burundi were systematically repressed and purged from the army, civil service, and university system.

In October 1993, 20 years after the 1972 flight, the assassination of Burundi’s first Hutu president triggered widespread ethnic fighting and the exodus of another 500,000 refugees. A year later, the Rwandan genocide—in which Hutu extremists murdered nearly 1 million Tutsi—took place. Over the following weeks, the number of refugees fleeing into Tanzania swelled to

470,000. These refugees, some of whom were members of the militias and Rwandan army responsible for the genocide, posed a security risk in the region and stretched to near breaking point the resources of the Tanzanian government and the relief agencies.

### Life in the Refugee Camps

The roughly 9,000 1972 Burundians currently being considered for U.S. resettlement live in isolated refugee camps in remote regions of Tanzania. The natural surroundings vary from hilly and forested to flat and dusty.

It is important to distinguish the 1972 Burundians targeted for U.S. resettlement from other Burundians who also arrived in Tanzania in 1972, but who live in government-administered settlements in the Tabora and Rukwa regions. The settlement population enjoys a degree of self-sufficiency and is not being proposed for resettlement by UNHCR.

For the 1972 Burundians being considered for resettlement, life in refugee camps in some ways resembles the rural life that they left behind in Burundi: People build mud houses for shelter, collect firewood for cooking, keep small gardens, raise ducks and other small animals, and practice their traditional customs.

Camp conditions are difficult. With no relatives sending remittances from abroad, refugees subsist on UN rations and small trading among themselves and with the local community. Burundian political groups have actively recruited in the camps, and refugees have been threatened and harassed for refusing to support the groups. Rape is also a concern for camp inhabitants.

The Tanzanian government's Ministry of Home Affairs is responsible for administering the camps. Camp leadership is made up of elected representatives, including a camp chairperson and vice-chairperson, and street and block leaders. In addition, a traditional Burundian form of leadership known as the *bashingantaha*, or council of elders, made up of religious leaders and prominent personalities, operates in the camps. These leaders mediate minor conflicts within the community.

### The Need for Resettlement

According to UNHCR, the 1972 Burundians cannot safely return to Burundi, and the Tanzanian government has made it clear that it does not want the refugees to settle permanently in Tanzania. Therefore, resettlement in a third country, such as the United States, is the only durable solution for the group.

Although a 2000 peace agreement in Burundi has enabled 300,000 Burundian refugees to return home from camps in the Congo, Rwanda, and Tanzania in recent years, most 1972 Burundians have been unable or unwilling to repatriate. One challenge to the group's repatriation is the length of time the refugees have spent outside their homeland. Most have spent their entire lives in exile, and as a result have acquired traits and habits that set them apart from other Burundians. They also bear an additional stigma: 1972 Burundians residing in Tanzania outside the refugee camps formed a radical opposition party that opposes the peace agreement and it is widely assumed in Burundi that the refugees in the camps share that opposition.

A third and particularly thorny issue for potential returnees is land. In Burundi, the population is almost entirely made up of small-scale peasant farmers, and in one of the most densely populated countries in Africa, access to farm land is highly competitive and contentious, especially for those who have been displaced. Many refugee returnees have faced difficulties reclaiming their land; for the 1972 Burundians, the difficulties could prove insurmountable. In most cases, their land was seized and redistributed by the Burundian government after they left the country. Most refugees were born outside Burundi or were small children when they left, and they often do not know the precise location of their family's land. For the 1972 Burundians, conflict over land would likely become a source of conflict and further displacement, which in turn could destabilize the peace process.

What about integrating the refugees into Tanzania? Although the Tanzanian government initially welcomed and supported the refugees, recent years have seen a fundamental change in attitude, and Tanzania has put into place laws and policies that severely restrict the refugees' freedom of movement, right to employment and property, and access to naturalization. These laws and policies make local integration virtually impossible.

## Cultural Attributes

### Languages

The official languages of Burundi are Kirundi and French. All 1972 Burundians, including those who have spent their entire lives outside of Burundi, speak and understand Kirundi, and many have picked up Kiswahili from living in Tanzania. A small number of well-educated refugees speak French. Very few individuals speak or understand English.

### Religion

The great majority of the refugees are Christian. Most are Protestants, although a significant minority, perhaps 20%, belong to the Catholic church. Among Protestants, the Pentecostal church is popular. A very small number of refugees identify themselves as Muslim.

Religion is central to everyday life in the camps. Social life revolves around church activities, such as choirs, bible reading groups, and women's groups. Churches provide the framework around which the refugees are able to organize themselves while in exile. They represent the most independent refugee-run organizations in the camps, even though some churches, such as the Roman Catholic, are headed by Tanzanians and are sometimes used by the government to disseminate information and directives to the refugees.

### Family Life and the Role of Women

Households are made up of nuclear families that, at least in the ideal, are independent economically from the extended family. Strong social ties, however, bind the extended family. People feel deep ties to cousins, nieces, and nephews. Uncles and aunts often assume care and responsibility for their siblings' children.

Traditional Burundian society is patriarchal. Men are seen as the natural heads of their households and communities. Traditionally, men farm while women and girls carry the work load of the home. Women have more duties than rights and are expected to subordinate themselves to male family members. They are in charge of firewood collection, cooking, laundry, and childcare. Access to social services and employment in the camps, however, has provided some women with educational and professional opportunities that traditionally have not been available to them.

Many women who have grown up in the camps have attended primary school, and some have attended secondary school. A smaller number have been able to receive training in traditionally female occupations, such as nursing and teaching. Women do not appear to be restricted socially from working outside the home.

### Food and Dietary Restrictions

Maize, which is grown in the camps, is a common food among the refugees. Camp rations include beans and a maize-based cereal. Cattle raised by refugees provide meat, and home gardens add vegetables to the refugees' diets.

There are no specific dietary restrictions, except those associated with well-known religions, such as the Muslim prohibition against the consumption of pork. Although alcohol use is discouraged by the Pentecostal and other evangelical churches, drinking beer is not uncommon.

### Traditional Practices That Might Conflict With U.S. Customs

The practices of female genital mutilation and early arranged marriages do not appear to be common with this population. Although women may marry as young as 16, there is no pressure for them to do so. Marriages are sometimes arranged by families, but there is no evidence of young women being forced into such unions against their will. There is some evidence of polygamy, but it is not widespread and it is discouraged by the churches.

Traditional medicine is practiced to some extent. People normally go to traditional practitioners when they cannot afford to buy modern medicine or travel to the hospitals outside the camps. Deaths of family members are sometimes attributed to witchcraft.

## Resettlement Considerations

### Health

According to the Overseas Processing Entity staff who are prescreening refugees for resettlement, many refugees in the camps report no physical illnesses. At the same time, staff currently processing refugees in Ngara Camp note “a range of health conditions.” Self-reported medical conditions include epilepsy, physical deformities, mental disabilities, and some Class A medical conditions. The incidence of HIV in this population is relatively low. The Centers for Disease Control has confirmed high rates for malaria and low rates for tuberculosis.

Many refugees have witnessed atrocities, and some individuals show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. Resettlement agency staff should be prepared to help new arrivals access mental health services as needed.

### Vocational and Professional Backgrounds

Almost all members of the group are farmers, and for most refugees the experience of continuous employment outside the home will be a new one. A small number of refugees in the camps work in trades such as carpentry, tailoring, and shoe and bicycle repair, and engage in small business. Some of the women make baskets, and some of the men make and sell clay pots. According to UNHCR, only about one third of those who are interested in learning a trade have been able to do so. Income-generating activities are minimal and on a small scale.

The camp population includes a small group of educated professionals. Among these are church leaders, teachers, nurses, clerks, and businessmen. A small number work for UNHCR or nongovernmental organizations as social workers, teachers, security guards, or medical personnel. Most professionals, however, are unable to work in their fields, and few opportunities exist in the camps for higher education and training.

### Education and Literacy Levels

Most refugee children have benefited from free primary education, which follows the Burundi curriculum. In lower grades, there are roughly as many girls as boys. Girls start dropping out when they reach higher grades, however, and very few manage to complete secondary education, which is not funded by UNHCR.

Although primary education is available in the camps, schools are very poorly equipped, teaching is far from ideal, class size is very large, and attendance is spotty. Moreover, students have very few opportunities in the camps to practice the skills they have learned. It has been estimated that about 20% of the adult population is literate.

### Exposure to Modern Amenities

Only a small number of the 1972 Burundian refugees have had direct experience with modern amenities, and most will need a careful and thorough orientation to modern urban life. In particular, they will need an introduction to the use of public transport and modern appliances and to the importance of work schedules, payment of bills, and daily school attendance. Refugees will also need to acquire basic English with an emphasis on numeracy and the use of money.

As is the case for other refugee groups, U.S.-bound Burundians will undergo an intensive 3- to 5-day pre-departure orientation that prepares them for their first months in the United States. The refugees will also receive an additional day of training shortly before departure that reviews the information previously learned, with a focus on what they can expect during their long journey to the United States. The additional day of training has been found to be of great benefit to refugees with little or no previous experience with modern amenities and air travel.

## Family Ties to the United States

Although communities of Burundian refugees can be found in the United States, Burundian refugees from Tanzania have been resettled only in small numbers since the mid-1990s. As a result, the 1972 Burundians are not likely to have close relatives in the United States.

## Special Needs Cases

Resettled refugees will include women and girls who have been the victims of sexual or domestic violence. As noted under “Health,” some refugees are likely to be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Single women head approximately 15% of the households, according to UNHCR data. Women without the support of a husband, brother, or other male family members will need outside support to become self-sufficient. Families may also be caring for children from their extended network of relatives.

## Caseworker Considerations

The ethnicity of a caseworker appears to be less of an issue than the ability to speak Kirundi, Kinyarwanda (Rwanda’s main language, closely related to Kirundi), or Kiswahili. Ethnicity has been used divisively as a political tool in Burundi, and refugees say they look forward to a time when it is no longer an important consideration. At the same time, resettlement agency staff should be alert to the possibility of ethnic tensions when the caseworker is also from Burundi.

## Other Considerations

Refugee leaders have expressed a preference to be resettled in places that are similar in climate and environment to what the refugees have experienced in Burundi and Tanzania—in other words, small rural towns where the weather is mild.

Among Burundians, old age begins at 40. Burundians will need to understand that in the United States, 40 is considered relatively young and that older adults play active roles in society, working and even studying well into their 60s.

Resettlement services will need to take into account this group’s low level of formal education, rural background, long residence in refugee camps, and past trauma.

The content in this Backgrounder draws from two written sources:

- *The 1972 Burundi Refugee Cohort in Tanzania*, a paper written for the COR Center by Patricia Daley, University of Oxford; and
- *Fact Sheet on the 1972 Burundians*, an online publication of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Additional information about the refugees and refugee camp conditions was provided by the staff of the Nairobi-based Overseas Processing Entity, under Director Anne-Marie Winter; Pindie Stephen, Coordinator of the International Organization for Migration’s Nairobi-based pre-departure cultural orientation training program; and Oliver Smith, Resettlement Officer, UNHCR, Kibondo, Tanzania. Statistics were provided by Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System.

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# At a Glance:

**Total Cases:** 2217

**Total Individuals:** 8506

**Average Case Size:** 5

There are many linked and cross-referenced cases.

**Country of Origin:** Burundi

Most have spent their entire lives as refugees outside of Burundi.

**Refugee Camps Experience:**

The refugees are from three camps in Tanzania: Ngara, Kibondo, and Kasulu

**Ethnicity:** Predominantly Hutu

**Native Language:** Kirundi

**Other Languages:**

Burundians understand Kinyarwanda, a language spoken in Rwanda that is closely related to Kirundi. Many have picked up Kiswahili in Tanzania. A small number know French. Knowledge of English is rare.

**Literacy:**

An estimated 20% can read and write in one or more languages.

**Exposure to Modern Amenities:**

Most have had little direct experience with modern amenities.

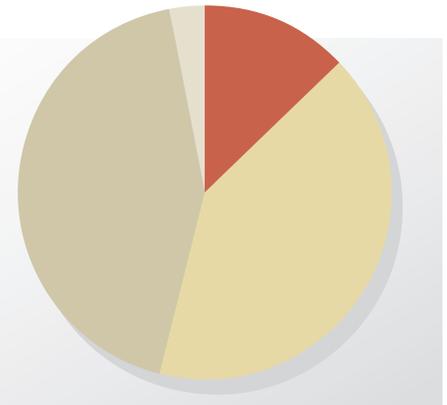
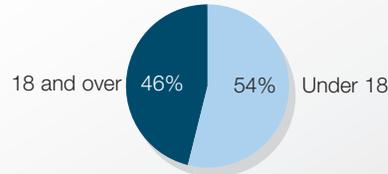
**Work Experience:**

Most have little work experience other than farming. A small number have worked in professions and trades.

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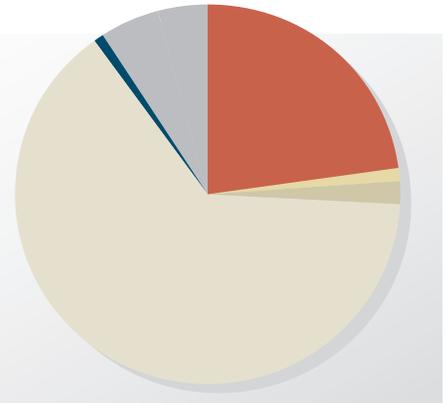
**Gender:** Male 49% Female 51%

**Ages:** Up to 4 13%  
5-17 41%  
18-59 43%  
60+ 3%



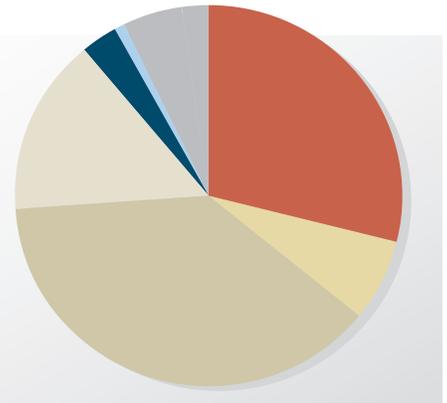
**Education Ages 5-17**

None 23%  
Intermediate 1%  
Kindergarten 2%  
Primary 64%  
Secondary 1%  
Bio-data unknown or incomplete 9%



**Education Ages 18 and Above**

None 29%  
Intermediate 7%  
Primary 38%  
Secondary 15%  
Technical School 3%  
University 1%  
Bio-data unknown or incomplete 7%



**Religion**

Muslim 2%  
No Religion 2%  
Christian 96%  
Largest Christian sect: Pentecostal

