



FLEEING ETHNIC VIOLENCE, THIS RWANDAN FAMILY HAS CROSSED THE NEAREST BORDER TO REACH NGARA, TANZANIA.

BY ALICE W. MUNYUA

It's old news to say the mass media — as a societal institution — has often played a major role in both fermenting and diffusing hostile conflicts. But while radio served to inflame conflict in the Rwandan and Burundian crisis, Radio Kwizera in Western Tanzania has tried to play a positive role in the resolution of conflicts, which have brought thousands of Rwandans and Burundians to the Kagera region.

THE REFUGEE CRISIS

The conflicts in both Rwanda and Burundi have led to the current refugee crisis in Tanzania (see sidebar). In the last 30 years (since independence) Tanzania has had an open door policy for refugees, welcoming and accommodating refugees from several neighboring countries. When the 1994 Rwandan crisis began, thousands of Rwandans fled to Tanzania. The mode of flight was dramatic: within 24 hours between the 28th and 29th of April, more than 250,000 refugees poured into Tanzania. The country granted immediate entry to all of these refugees without formality.

However, Tanzania's response to the genocide was controversial at this time. State-controlled Radio Tanzania Dar Es Salaam (RTD), in its programme "Commentary after News," blamed the massacre on the Rwandan Patriotic Front's lust for power. Instead of trying to reduce stereotypes and generalizations, state-owned Tanzanian radio was in a way reflecting the biases which led to the conflict.

The Rwandans and Burundians taking refuge in Tanzania received vast media coverage, but this did not guarantee a neutral stand from

most of the media institutions. Hutu's and Tutsi's tried and still try to influence public opinion in Tanzania.

Ngara is in one of the most isolated regions in Tanzania. The refugees who settled here were often severely starved of accurate information about decisions taken on their behalf in different national and international forums. This isolation and lack of accurate information aggravated their poor psychological condition, which was often characterized by anxiety, denial and wishful thinking. With no alternative source of information, those who had access to any sort of outside information took advantage of the situation to spread mistrust and rumors.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF RADIO KWIZERA TO SUPPORT CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The important and controversial role of the media in the Rwandan and Burundian conflicts

"ON APRIL 29TH, 1994, THE WORLD WITNESSED THE LARGEST REFUGEE EXODUS IN HISTORY WHEN AN ESTIMATED 250,000 RWANDANS CROSSED THE BORDER INTO TANZANIA."

Radio Kwizera

Sowing the seeds of hope for the refugees of Burundi and Rwanda

did not escape the attention of refugee organizations. Following a needs evaluation of the newly arrived refugee population in Ngara, the Jesuit Refugee Service — an international organization dedicated to the service and accompaniment of refugees and displaced people — established Radio Kwizera in Ngara town, near the large refugee camps.

The Jesuit Refugee Service defined the role of Radio Kwizera as the encouragement of dialogue and the promotion of peace and reconciliation.

JRS recognized highly charged emotions as one of the factors affecting refugee conflict resolution and reconciliation. The degree of frustration, distrust, isolation, and alienation consistently expressed by refugees was striking. Misunderstandings were common place. The sense that their voices were not being heard appeared to be one of the central causes for setting refugees into a defensive, suspicious posture with non-refugees and, indeed, between refugees.

Radio Kwizera — which means "hope" in the Kinyarwanda language — was established in 1995. From the onset of the radio project, a dual mandate of serving both the refugee and local population was clearly established. The station's agenda was to offer an alternative media source, while promoting dialogue between the communities, and supplying accurate, balanced and comprehensible information. The station has many religious programs such as an inter-religious dialogue hour featuring refugee religious leaders from a wide variety of denominations focusing on peace and reconciliation.

There are forty hours weekly of refugee programming in Kirundi on issues like the environment, health, education, culture, women, children, tracing parents and children, etc. This educates the host population about refugee culture but also helps refugees sustain their own cultures. Special attention is given to refugee women and children, providing them airtime to articulate and share concerns.

Radio Kwizera took part in the mass information campaign to promote voluntary repatriation in 1996. In December of the same year, all the Rwandans in Tanzania were repatriated, and consequently the station stopped broadcasting in Kinyarwanda. After the repatriation of the Rwandan refugees in December 1996, only about 90,000 Burundian refugees remained in the Ngara district and JRS decided to remain and offer its services to the remaining refugees as a self-funded organization.

In 1995, a change in government policy resulted in the official closing of Tanzanian borders to new refugees. Then at the end of 1996, Tanzania used force to bring about the abrupt repatriation of some half a million Rwandans, but non-governmental organizations felt powerless to oppose or support this event. During this period, Radio Kwizera went through its own conflict, unsure whether it should speak out about the repatriation abuses and be thrown out, or remain quiet and stay. As an implementing partner of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees at the time, the station chose the middle ground and promoted voluntary repatriation.

LESSONS LEARNED

From the station's contact with refugees through interviews, refugees working for the station, and conversations with JRS pastoral workers, Radio Kwizera has come to recognize that reconciliation is a slow process and a distant goal. Refugees are by definition people who have fled from those who would kill them, and thus they often see conflict resolution and reconciliation as a process beginning with those who actually caused the flight and consequent suffering.

For many Burundian refugees, telling the truth is the most important step towards opening a space for reconciliation, especially the truth about the origins of the conflict driving them into Tanzania. Giving the refugees a forum to speak about how they perceive the conflict is Radio Kwizera's major challenge.

It is clear that not all Rwandan and Burundian refugees want to establish peaceful exist-

ence in their respective countries. Some are not interested in reconciliation and see attempts to promote quick reconciliation as a way of glossing over the conflicts.

Peacemaking is a long-term, complicated process involving many levels of society. Radio can play an important role in this process through education.

Radio Kwizera undertook this difficult assignment of educating both the refugee community and the host population about each other. Apart from broadcasting to refugees, Radio Kwizera has employed refugee reporters, announcers and program producers. Refugees have gained confidence in Radio Kwizera as a forum to talk to fellow refugees and reduce alienation. Confidence is also built when refugees leave their camps to work among the Tanzanians, and they share the first hand infor-

mation gained with others. They regard Radio Kwizera as a voice for the refugees, facilitator of conflict resolution, and catalyst for peace and understanding as it continues to sow the seeds of hope.

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Editor's note: For a detailed analysis of the Rwandan crisis, consult "Broadcasting Genocide: Censorship, Propaganda & State-Sponsored Violence in Rwanda 1990-1994" published by Article 19: International Centre Against Censorship (October 1996). Contact: Article 19, Lancaster House, 33 Islington High Street, London N1 9LH
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Burundi and Rwanda: Social history and the media

Social conflict can be described as "any situation in which two or more entities or parties perceive that they possess mutually incompatible goals." While it is impossible for social life to be a place without conflict, how conflict is expressed varies according to the cultural, political and religious context in which it arises.

A key characteristic of conflicts in the post cold war period is that they are violent internal struggles between groups whose main affiliations are ethnicity and/or religion. While some commentators believe it is more accurate to name these struggles as "identity" rather than ethnic conflicts, it is almost impossible to speak of Rwanda and Burundi without considering the ethnic tensions between Hutu and Tutsi members of those two divided societies.

Politically inspired ethnic conflict is not a new phenomenon in Burundi, and therefore massive displacement of the nation's population is, sadly, not a unique occurrence in the country's history.

During the last 30 years, displacement has become endemic, produced by Burundian society's tangled web of mistrust, resentment, privilege, retaliation and injustice. Time after time, the country's political power struggles and ethnically phased policies have triggered violence, resulting in staggering death tolls and traumatized citizens fleeing their homes. During the pre-conflict period in Burundi, the media played a role in escalating the crisis. From radio to the print media, emphasis was placed on the injustices Hutu's had suffered because of the Tutsi policy of ethnic rule.

The Rwandan conflict on the other hand was the most tragic period in the country's history. The genocide following the plane crash, which killed both president Habyarimana of Rwanda and Ntaryamira of Burundi, was masterminded by extremist politicians intent on manipulating tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi in order to decimate opposition. Within 72 hours, Rwanda's most prominent opposition figures had been assassinated and a self-proclaimed interim government was formed. The latter, comprised of Hutu extremists largely from Habyarimana's national Republican Movement for Development and Democracy (MRN D) and the Hutu extremist Coalition for the Defence of the Republic (CDR), directed a political campaign aimed at eliminating the Tutsi minority. By June 1994, an estimated 500,000 to one million people had been massacred.

The role of the media was clearly evident in the Rwandan conflict. It was used for hate propaganda. Politicians used Radio Mille Collines to spread hatred and biases, which in turn incited the population to take part in the killing. State-run Radio Rwanda provided a platform for the interim government and urged the elimination of anyone suspected of opposing the regime. Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTL) encouraged listeners to "fill empty graves."

As a result, on April 29th, 1994, the world witnessed the largest refugee exodus in history when an estimated 250,000 Rwandans crossed the border into Tanzania within 48 hours. The international media then changed focus to the refugee crisis in Tanzania rather than on the continuing genocide in neighboring Rwanda.