AN OPERATION OF DECEIT

Burundi’s secret mission in Congo

The Burundi Human Rights Initiative
July 2022
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WHAT IS THE BURUNDI HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVE?

The Burundi Human Rights Initiative (BHRI) is an independent project that aims to document the evolving human rights situation in Burundi. It intends to expose the drivers of human rights violations with a view to establishing an accurate record that will help bring justice to Burundians and contribute to restoring respect for human rights.

BHRI’s publications also analyse the political and social context in which these violations occur to provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of human rights trends in Burundi.

BHRI has no political affiliation. Its investigations cover human rights violations by the Burundian government as well as abuses by armed opposition groups.

BHRI welcomes feedback on its publications as well as further information about the human rights situation in Burundi. Please write to contact@burundihri.org or +1 267 896 3399 (WhatsApp). Additional information is available at burundihri.org or on Twitter at twitter.com/@BHRI_IDHB.
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Since December 2021, the Burundian army has poured hundreds of troops into neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Successive waves of soldiers, bolstered by members of the ruling party youth league, the Imbonerakure, have been sent on a mission to fight Burundian armed opposition groups across the border.

Their main target is RED-Tabara (Resistance Movement for the Rule of Law-Tabara, Mouvement de la résistance pour un État de droit-Tabara), an armed group that has launched sporadic attacks in Burundi in recent years. Operating primarily from the DRC, RED-Tabara vehemently opposes the Burundian government, but its strength has fluctuated over the years. Many Burundians are therefore puzzled by their government’s decision to throw so much military might at it.

There is an official silence surrounding the military operation. The presence of large numbers of Burundian soldiers and Imbonerakure in the DRC is an open secret, but several months on, the government has not publicly acknowledged sending troops there. Soldiers and Imbonerakure cross the border in a clandestine manner, usually at night; some soldiers are ordered to swap their military uniforms for civilian clothes and leave behind possessions that could identify them. Soldiers and Imbonerakure returning from the DRC have been warned not to talk about their mission. Little or no explanation is given to the families of those who die on the battlefield. The Congolese government has also remained silent about its neighbour’s incursions onto its territory.

Nevertheless, information has filtered out. Testimonies from some of those who fought in the DRC reveal a painfully ill-prepared operation that has resulted in significant casualties among Burundian soldiers and Imbonerakure. Many Imbonerakure were lured into joining the operation with little or no explanation or training, sometimes under false pretences. In addition, Burundian soldiers and Imbonerakure, as well as their allies from Congolese armed groups, are reported to have committed serious abuses against Congolese civilians.

Cross-border operations by the Burundian army in the DRC are not a new phenomenon. For more than 10 years, Burundian soldiers and Imbonerakure have periodically sought to hunt down Burundian armed opposition groups in the DRC. But the current operation is different in scale and duration: larger numbers of troops, sent in several deployments, have been fighting in the DRC for seven months.

The operation has drawn in Congolese armed groups, some of whom have formed alliances with the Burundian military or with RED-Tabara. These collaborations have further destabilised an area of DRC’s South Kivu province already riven by armed conflict. With frequently shifting frontlines, Congolese civilians have become caught up in the fighting. The Burundian military operation occurs at a time when the M23 armed group has resurfaced in North Kivu province, with allegations of Rwandan support, further escalating local and regional tensions.

The Burundian Human Rights Initiative (BHRI) decided to document aspects of this military operation because of the limited public information available, especially in Burundi, and the lack of
international attention surrounding it. The secretive nature of the Burundian military build-up in the DRC, along with the militarisation of *Imbonerakure* and the openly hardline rhetoric of senior ruling party officials in Burundi, should concern international actors. The drift towards a more authoritarian and militaristic approach could signal a backsliding towards an even more repressive form of governance.

The report also analyses the rationale behind the Burundian military operation in the DRC, placing it in the context of recent political developments in Burundi. In parallel with this operation, leaders of the ruling party in Burundi, the National Council for the Defence of Democracy-Forces for the Defence of Democracy (*Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces pour la défense de la démocratie*, CNDD-FDD), have stepped up their efforts to further indoctrinate and militarise the *Imbonerakure*, preparing them to take on an ever-greater role in national security duties. The influence of hardline leaders in the CNDD-FDD is becoming increasingly pronounced, as key figures, such as the party’s secretary general, openly whip up patriotic fervour and mobilise *Imbonerakure* across the country, overriding President Ndayishimiye’s attempts to present a conciliatory and internationally acceptable image.

BHRI interviewed a range of Burundian and Congolese sources, including Burundian soldiers and *Imbonerakure* from at least six provinces who fought in the operation or had direct information about it; members of their families in Burundi; other ruling party and opposition members; and members of RED-Tabara. BHRI also had access to other materials and information confirming elements of these testimonies. For security reasons, this report does not name witnesses or provide identifying details.

BHRI wrote to the Burundian president, the minister of defence, the chief-of-staff of the Burundian National Defence Force, the secretary general of the CNDD-FDD, the national secretary of the *Imbonerakure* and other CNDD-FDD-affiliated leagues, and the Congolese minister of defence, with a view to including their responses in this report. None of the officials responded to the substance of the letter. The secretary general of the CNDD-FDD replied, saying that BHRI was “not known” and should address its letter to the person who provided the information, as “he seems to be better informed than I am”. The Burundian minister of defence replied with a short question asking for clarification on the identity of the person who sent the letter. The other officials did not reply.
1. **BURUNDI’S CROSS-BORDER INCURSION GETS THE GREEN LIGHT**

When President Évariste Ndayishimiye left the Congolese capital Kinshasa after a three-day state visit in July 2021, he had good news to report to his government: he had discussed with his Congolese counterpart President Félix Tshisekedi how to “eradicate” armed groups in eastern DRC. More importantly, the presidents had signed three agreements, one of which referred to security cooperation. It also seems that they tacitly agreed that Burundian armed forces could enter the DRC to attack RED-Tabara.

Ndayishimiye had another opportunity to make his case at a regional summit in Nairobi on 21 April 2022 and during a much-publicised visit by President Tshisekedi to Burundi in May 2022. A joint statement issued at the end of Tshisekedi’s visit highlighted “the need to strengthen mixed patrols and operations between the defence and security forces of the two countries”.¹ At the April summit, East African Community leaders also agreed to create a regional force to address security threats posed by armed groups in the DRC, in which Burundian troops could participate alongside those of other East African countries.² In June 2022, Burundi agreed to take part in this regional force, which could formalise and extend its stay in the DRC.

The unofficial green light for Burundi’s military operation in the DRC came at a politically fortuitous time for Ndayishimiye; he needed to placate hardliners in his government who were increasingly frustrated with his conciliatory language and perceived him as weak. But the diplomatic glad-handing obscured the fact that the Burundian army had already unilaterally sent hundreds of soldiers and Imbonerakure to the DRC. This was not a joint operation with the Congolese armed forces or part of a broader regional effort. On the contrary: the Burundian army had formed alliances with Congolese armed groups, some of which oppose the Congolese army.

One Burundian involved in planning the operation from the start was intelligence agent Joseph Mathias Niyonzima alias Kazungu, who has played an important role in targeting armed groups in the DRC for several years.

A member of the Burundian National Intelligence Service (*Service national de renseignement*, SNR) and a former member of the National Liberation Forces (*Forces nationales de libération*, FNL),³ Niyonzima had previously been sent to the DRC in 2014 to hunt down members of a break-away armed faction of the FNL. During this time, he brought Imbonerakure to Kiliba Ondes, near the Rusizi river in eastern DRC, to be trained by Burundian military with the goal of attacking

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³ The FNL was a predominantly Hutu armed group formed in 1980, which turned into a political party in 2009 and changed its name to CNL in 2019. The CNL is currently the largest opposition party in Burundi.
Burundian armed opposition groups. Revelations about this training caused controversy in Burundi at the time, in contrast with the silence surrounding the current operation. Niyonzima has been involved in numerous cases of extrajudicial executions, torture and other human rights violations in Burundi and was sanctioned by the European Union and the United States in 2015. Soon after Ndayishimiye’s visit to Kinshasa in July 2021, Niyonzima, along with Burundian military intelligence officials including Adjutant Major Onesphere Ndayishimiye alias Braddock, Adjutant Jean Bosco Ahishakiye and Lt. Col. Libère Niyonkuru, arrived in the DRC to prepare for the arrival of Burundian military and Imbonerakure. Burundian media and civil society activists have reported that Braddock has been involved in human rights violations in Burundi, including an enforced disappearance in September 2021; BHRI has not confirmed these reports.7

A Burundian soldier deployed to the DRC in late 2021 confirmed the SNR’s involvement in the preparatory work: “(The SNR) tried to check where (the armed opposition groups) were before the (Burundian) troops arrived,” he said.8

In January 2022, Niyonzima held a meeting in the Congolese city of Uvira, in South Kivu, with Congolese security officials who led Sokola II (“clean up” in Lingala), a military operation launched in 2015 in North and South Kivu provinces with the aim of dismantling armed groups. Yet at the same time, the Burundian army was collaborating with some of the armed groups targeted by the Congolese army in the same operation.

Alliances with at least two Congolese armed groups – Mai-Mai Kijangala and Gumino – were key to the Burundian army’s plans.9

Mai-Mai Kijangala is led by a man known as Kijangala, a former member of several defunct Mai-Mai groups, most of which were created to defend their communities against attacks by armed

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6 Interview with confidential source, 12 May 2022. Ndayishimiye and Ahishakiye were detained at the SNR headquarters in Bujumbura in late 2021, along with Niyonkuru who was allegedly accused of murder and detained on the orders of Prime Niyongabo, chief-of-staff of the Burundian National Defence Force. All three men were later released.


8 Interview with Burundian soldier, 20 April 2022.

9 Mai-Mai is a broad term used to refer to community-based armed groups in the DRC. Originally created to defend their ethnic group or local area, Mai-Mai now frequently loot, steal and collaborate with other armed groups.
elements from other ethnic groups or foreign armed actors. In the past, Kijangala had collaborated with RED-Tabara, then broke away and started his own armed group, ostensibly to protect his Bafuliro ethnic group from attacks; like other Mai-Mai groups, Mai-Mai Kijangala soon become known for armed theft and looting of cattle. His former collaboration with RED-Tabara, his control over a strategic area near the Rusizi plain and contacts with other Mai-Mai groups made him an attractive collaborator for the Burundian army. His relationship with Burundian officials is so close that he reportedly has a house in Bujumbura and travels to and from the border in vehicles belonging to the SNR or to Burundian military intelligence.

The Burundian army also rekindled links with Shaka Nyamusaraba, a commander from the Banyamulenge ethnic group, who reportedly leads Gumino, a largely Banyamulenge armed group; the Burundian military has longstanding ties to Gumino, dating back to 2018. In the past, Nyamusaraba was a member of other armed groups and also served with the Congolese armed forces, but deserted after allegations of rape and looting. A long-time opponent of the Rwandan government, in 2018 he was a leader of the armed wing of the Rwandan National Congress (RNC) in eastern DRC. Nyamusaraba collaborated with members of RED-Tabara in the past, but turned against them in favour of the Burundian army, reportedly because of Rwandan support to RED-Tabara in 2015 and 2016.

Some sources have reported that the Burundian army also collaborated with other Mai-Mai groups, such as Mai-Mai Buhirwa, who assisted Burundian soldiers in looting cattle.

In April 2022, the Burundian government tried to further expand its alliances by meeting other Congolese armed groups active in South Kivu province. Once again, Niyonzima played a key role and met representatives of at least two Mai-Mai groups. These groups had recently clashed with Gumino (one of the Burundian army’s allies), as well as with the Congolese army (with whom

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11 Interviews with confidential sources, 20 and 26 April 2022.


Niyonzima had talked in January), illustrating the apparently contradictory and opportunistic nature of these alliances.15

2. GATHERING THE TROOPS

Military recruitment

As Niyonzima and military intelligence agents prepared for the arrival of the Burundian military in the DRC, the selection of soldiers and Imbonerakure who would serve in the operation was underway in Burundi.

Soldiers were carefully chosen for the operation. Many of those recruited for the initial phases were from the Hutu ethnic group and perceived as loyal to the CNDD-FDD. But as the toll of the operation began to rise and some soldiers balked at going, some members of the former Burundian Armed Forces (Forces armées burundaises), known as ex-FAB – many of whom are Tutsi and are often viewed as opponents by the CNDD-FDD – were also recruited. Some sources, however, said that few ex-FAB were chosen, as there were fears that they might have sympathies with RED-Tabara.16 One source said that some soldiers who weren’t liked by their superiors were sent to the DRC.17

Soldiers were recruited from different military units, including the 111th battalion (based at Camp Gatumba in Bujumbura province), the 112th battalion (based in Camp Cibitoke, in Cibitoke province) and the 212th battalion (based in the Rukoko forest, in Bubanza province). Many were sent to Camp Cibitoke, which acted as a central assembly point before they crossed the border. Others mustered at an agricultural institute in the Rukoko forest in Bubanza province (Institut des sciences agronomiques du Burundi, ISABU). A soldier said he stayed at ISABU for two weeks with approximately 700 soldiers before their deployment to the DRC in December 2021. He said that military intelligence and military police officials were heavily involved in the recruitment and preparation of soldiers.18

According to multiple sources, Lt. Col. Léonidas Nyandwi, head of the 212th battalion, commanded Burundian soldiers in the DRC from early January to late March or early April 2022, when he was replaced by Lt. Col. Désiré Ntihabose, commander of the 112th battalion. Ntihabose had fought for the FDD, the armed wing of the CNDD-FDD, during Burundi’s civil war and is believed to be a

16 Interview with Burundian soldier, 20 April 2022, and interview with foreign security official, 11 May 2022. RED-Tabara is sometimes perceived as a predominantly Tutsi group, even though it also has Hutu members.
17 Interview with confidential source, 27 May 2022.
18 Interview with Burundian soldier, 20 April 2022.
staungh supporter of the ruling party.\textsuperscript{19} He was promoted to the rank of colonel on 1 July.\textsuperscript{20} Venant Bibonimana alias Gatovyi, the head of the military camp in Kabezi (Bujumbura province) known as Camp Chinois, was responsible for preparing and sending soldiers and \textit{Imbonerakure} to the DRC across Lake Tanganyika, at night.\textsuperscript{21}

Many soldiers were told to change into civilian clothes before they crossed into the DRC. A witness said that Lt. Col. Libère Niyonkuru, who at the time was deputy head of military intelligence, arrived at ISABU with two vehicles full of torches, jeans, shirts and rubber boots.\textsuperscript{22} One soldier said that military officials told them they should wear civilian clothes so that “the international community” could not identify them as Burundian soldiers and that if they were arrested in the DRC, they could claim they were members of RED-Tabara.\textsuperscript{23} Other sources said that soldiers who were part of earlier or later waves were allowed to wear their military uniforms in the DRC.\textsuperscript{24}

Military officials also prevented soldiers from taking their identity documents and mobile phones with them, presumably to prevent information from leaking about the clandestine mission and to prevent their identification.

Soldiers were paid between 70,000 Burundian francs (approximately US$34) and 120,000 Burundian francs (approximately US$59), depending on their rank. Some left the money with military intelligence officials who told them to collect it when they returned to Burundi.\textsuperscript{25}

Most of the hundreds of soldiers were driven to Buganda commune, in Cibitoke province, from where \textit{Imbonerakure} took them into the DRC across the Rusizi river at night, in pirogues; some crossed over Lake Tanganyika.

Some soldiers questioned the purpose of the operation and its lack of transparency, and expressed reservations about their participation. Media reports alleged that more than 40 soldiers who allegedly refused to go to the DRC or who asked to see documents authorising the operation were executed in two separate incidents in Cibitoke province, between late January and mid-February.\textsuperscript{26} Other sources said that a soldier who questioned what they were doing in the DRC and another who was accused of leaking information about the operation were killed.\textsuperscript{27} BHRI was unable to confirm

\textsuperscript{19} Interview with foreign diplomat and security officials, 11 May 2022; interview with UN official, 12 May 2022.
\textsuperscript{22} Interview with confidential source, 10 April 2022.
\textsuperscript{23} Interview with Burundian soldier, 1 May 2022.
\textsuperscript{24} Information from \textit{Imbonerakure}, 23 January 2022; interview with Congolese source in the Rusizi plain, 10 April 2022; interview with confidential source, 13 May 2022; interview with \textit{Imbonerakure}, 13 May 2022.
\textsuperscript{25} Interview with Burundian soldier, 20 April 2022.
\textsuperscript{27} Interviews with confidential sources, 8 March, 5 May and 13 May 2022.
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these reports. Several soldiers were detained in early 2022 after they allegedly refused to serve in the DRC. Some were later released. The fate of the others is not known.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{Imbonerakure recruitment}

Large numbers of \textit{Imbonerakure} joined the Burundian military in the DRC. \textit{Imbonerakure} are civilians. Although some are demobilised combatants and others have been taught how to use certain firearms, many younger members of the youth league do not have any formal military training or experience. However, this did not stop CNDD-FDD and military officials from recruiting them and using them in frontline military duties in the DRC – as they have done in other operations in the past.

\textit{Imbonerakure} were recruited from several provinces, including Bujumbura, Bubanza, Cibitoke, Gitega, Kayanza, Kirundo, Muramvya, Muyinga and Ngozi.\textsuperscript{29} Like the soldiers, they were initially chosen according to their perceived loyalty to the CNDD-FDD. National-level CNDD-FDD leaders gave instructions to provincial officials, who then instructed local party members to select suitable \textit{Imbonerakure} in their area. They were told to recruit \textit{Imbonerakure} they could trust, who were “ready to defend the country’s interests” and who could handle weapons. In one \textit{commune}, only those between the ages of 25 and 40 were chosen.\textsuperscript{30} Multiple sources said that current and former provincial police commissioners were involved in the recruitment.\textsuperscript{31}

Some \textit{Imbonerakure} were effectively duped into a clandestine combat mission in a foreign country for which they were unprepared. CNDD-FDD leaders gave them little information about their assignment. An \textit{Imbonerakure} who was part of the first wave sent to the DRC in December 2021 said that a CNDD-FDD representative in his \textit{commune} called him, told him that he wanted to send him to the DRC and that he would find out the nature of the mission on the day of his departure.\textsuperscript{32}

Another \textit{Imbonerakure}, who spent three months in the DRC, said that at first, he wasn’t even told where he would be going. He was called to a meeting at the CNDD-FDD national headquarters in Bujumbura, then he and other \textit{Imbonerakure} were told to go to a house in another neighbourhood of Bujumbura. There, the Secretary General of the CNDD-FDD, Révérien Ndikuriyo, asked the recruits: “If the country is attacked, are you ready to defend it?” The \textit{Imbonerakure} all said yes; they believed that if they said no, they would be accused of being opponents.\textsuperscript{33}

Alfred Innocent Museremu, head of internal intelligence at the SNR, and Niyonzima alias Kazungu also took part in the meeting. Museremu and Niyonzima supplied the recruits with rubber boots and

\textsuperscript{28} Information from confidential source, 22-23 February 2022.
\textsuperscript{29} Interviews with \textit{Imbonerakure} and other sources, April 2022.
\textsuperscript{30} Information from \textit{Imbonerakure}, 31 May 2022.
\textsuperscript{31} Interview with confidential source, 13 May 2022; information from confidential source, 19 March 2022.
\textsuperscript{32} Information from \textit{Imbonerakure}, 31 May 2022.
\textsuperscript{33} Interview with confidential source, 13 May 2022.
shoes. Later that evening, the *Imbonerakure* were given weapons and police uniforms, and were told to wear either the shirt or the trousers of the police uniform when they crossed into the DRC. 34

Other *Imbonerakure* and sources close to them confirmed the role of senior CNDD-FDD leaders in recruiting and organising *Imbonerakure* for the operation. For example, an *Imbonerakure* said that Sylvestre Ndayizeye, the national secretary of the *Imbonerakure* and other CNDD-FDD-affiliated leagues, met him in the basement of the CNDD-FDD national headquarters in Bujumbura:

“(Ndayizeye) told me that I should get ready, that they wanted to send me somewhere because they knew I had been in the army... Three days later, the same person who had called me (to the meeting) asked for my (phone number). I gave it to him and later, I saw 100,000 (Burundian francs) (had been credited to the phone). He told me to leave this money at home and that they would give me what was needed for the trip when I left.” The *Imbonerakure* only learned that he was going to the DRC when his group of approximately 90 people – *Imbonerakure* as well as serving and demobilised soldiers – arrived at Camp Chinois in Kabezi (Bujumbura province). 35

Another *Imbonerakure* was told to go to a “meeting”, only to be taken to a football stadium in Cibitoke province where he joined dozens of *Imbonerakure* from across the country. When they were told to “get ready”, the *Imbonerakure* didn’t know what he was preparing for. Another person told him: “Don’t worry. There is money. You will be given 100,000 Burundian francs (approximately US$48) immediately. It won’t be difficult. You’re just going to do patrols in a particular place. And when you return, each of you will be satisfied with the reward.” 36 Later, however, the *Imbonerakure* were told: “There is money for you, but if you take money over (to the DRC), there’s a risk they will steal it from you. We’re going to give 10,000 francs to each of you and send you the rest later.” 37 When they returned from the DRC after about a month, they never received payment.

Other *Imbonerakure* and people close to them said that *Imbonerakure* were promised between 50,000 (approximately US$24) and 200,000 Burundian francs (approximately US$96). Some picked up their pay from Camp Cibitoke, others from CNDD-FDD offices in their area. 38 Other *Imbonerakure* were not promised any money and received nothing; they were too afraid to ask for remuneration. 39

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34 Interview with confidential source, 13 May 2022.
35 Information from conversation with *Imbonerakure*, 13 April 2022; interview with former *Imbonerakure*, 24 February 2022.
36 Information from conversation with *Imbonerakure*, 23 January 2022.
37 Information from conversation with *Imbonerakure*, 23 January 2022.
38 Interview with confidential source who spoke with an *Imbonerakure*, 4 May 2022; interview with confidential source, 29 April 2022.
39 Interview with *Imbonerakure*, 13 May 2022.
3. **BURUNDIAN SOLDIERS AND IMBONERAKURE ARRIVE IN THE DRC**

Several hundred Burundian soldiers and *Imbonerakure* – more than 1,000 – are believed to have gone to the DRC in successive waves since late 2021. Around 700 are estimated to have been there at one time, in the early phase of the deployment in December 2021.40 The UN Group of Experts collected information on 17 incursions or operations by the Burundian military and *Imbonerakure* in the territory of Uvira, in the DRC, between September 2021 and March 2022.41 BHRI was unable to confirm the exact number of soldiers and *Imbonerakure* deployed or the number of incursions. The duration of their deployment varied, but seemed to last between one and four months. The largest number of troops appears to have been deployed in December 2021 and January 2022. In the following weeks, successive groups of soldiers were sent to reinforce or replace those deployed in the first phase.42 Troop movements were also reported between April and July, and soldiers and *Imbonerakure* were still present in eastern DRC in mid-July.43

When they arrived in the DRC after crossing the Rusizi river, the soldiers and *Imbonerakure* were met by members of Mai-Mai Kijangala and led to various military positions.44 They walked long distances, often at night, without sufficient food or medicine. One soldier said they travelled at night to try to avoid the Congolese army (*Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo*, FARDC).45 The FARDC didn’t intervene to stop these incursions, but sometimes appeared to target or pursue Burundian soldiers or *Imbonerakure* when they operated with Congolese armed groups such as Mai-Mai Kijangala.

Two *Imbonerakure* who were sent to the DRC in early 2022 said they were given rice and beans to take with them, but these supplies were insufficient.46 A soldier said that each soldier was promised 5,000 Burundian francs (approximately US$2.40) per day for food before leaving Burundi, but never received it. “Whenever we arrived in a field, we took cassava or corn,” he said. “We were forced to steal in the fields, as well as (steal) cows, sheep and goats.”47

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42 Information from confidential sources, February–March 2022.
43 Interview with foreign security official, 30 June 2022; information from confidential sources, 4 and 19 July 2022.
45 Interview with Burundian soldier, 20 April 2022.
46 Interview with *Imbonerakure*, 13 May 2022; interview with *Imbonerakure*, 13 April 2022.
47 Interview with Burundian soldier, 20 April 2022.
Imbonerakure served several functions in the operation. Those with military training took part in the fighting. Some, who had previously been to eastern DRC and knew the area, helped guide soldiers or locate RED-Tabara fighters, while others with less experience in battle or no knowledge of the area carried equipment. Some were sent to loot food and cattle and carried these back to improvised military camps set up by Burundian soldiers. These tasks could prove deadly, as Imbonerakure sometimes fell into ambushes set up by RED-Tabara.\textsuperscript{48} When soldiers ran out of ammunition, Imbonerakure, escorted by a few soldiers, were sent to the border, at the Rusizi river, to pick up new supplies.\textsuperscript{49}

Many Imbonerakure appeared to consider the mission an opportunity to loot crops from fields, steal cattle and carry out abuses against Congolese civilians. “The local population really suffered,” said an Imbonerakure who participated in the operation. “Combatants stole and ate crops from their fields... (The Burundian) military and Imbonerakure attacked the Congolese population. (They did this) a lot... Most of the victims were children, women and the elderly. They killed civilians.”\textsuperscript{50}

Several sources confirmed that Burundian soldiers or Imbonerakure stole crops and cattle, and forced Congolese civilians to carry their goods. A Congolese farmer in the Rusizi plain explained how Burundian soldiers made him and a relative carry baggage for them in February 2022:

“There were two of us... we were working in our field. When we were going home, they captured us... They put baggage on our heads, but first they asked us to dig cassava for them. They ate the cassava raw without even peeling it. That was at 2 pm. They stayed with us until 6 pm. I was so tired… They almost shot me when I fell down. They thought I was going to run away... One of them shot near me, but another grabbed him (to stop him).”\textsuperscript{51}

Many young men living in areas where the Burundians often passed chose to spend the night outside their villages to avoid being caught by Burundian soldiers or Imbonerakure. Other Congolese civilians were also displaced from their homes by the fighting.\textsuperscript{52}

Some of those abducted and forced to carry goods by Burundian soldiers, Imbonerakure or their allies from Congolese armed groups were women and girls.

“Four women… were returning from the field. They came across these thugs who forced them to carry their baggage,” said a Congolese witness. “One of (the women) put a soldier on her back who had fallen ill on the way. They walked all night. It took them two days to return to the village. We thought they had been kidnapped by… armed groups, but when they arrived... they told us they were used to carry bags for men in military uniforms speaking Kirundi and a little Swahili.”\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{48} Information from Imbonerakure, 31 May 2022.
\textsuperscript{49} Information from Imbonerakure, 31 May 2022.
\textsuperscript{50} Interview with Imbonerakure, 13 May 2022.
\textsuperscript{51} Interview with Congolese witness, 10 April 2022.
\textsuperscript{52} Interview with Congolese security officials, April 2022; interview with UN official, 16 May 2022.
\textsuperscript{53} Interview with Congolese witness, 10 April 2022.
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Several Congolese and Burundian sources, including some who took part in the operation, said that Burundian soldiers or Imbonerakure raped Congolese women. BHRI has so far been unable to obtain details of these allegations.

4. FIGHTING AND DEATHS IN THE DRC

Large numbers of Imbonerakure and Burundian soldiers were killed during the operation. Precise numbers are difficult to obtain. One soldier estimated that more than 200 were killed between late December 2021 and April 2022. However, as soldiers and Imbonerakure were sent in several waves, even those who participated in the operation may not know the total number of casualties. An unknown number of RED-Tabara combatants were also killed.

Many soldiers and Imbonerakure were killed in clashes with RED-Tabara in early 2022. Jean Claude Nibigira, RED-Tabara’s military chief-of-staff, said that the group first fought the Burundian army in December 2021 in the Kashengo forest, in the mid-plateaux, then in continuous further clashes for a month and a half. The Burundian military and Imbonerakure, guided by Nyamusaraba, pushed RED-Tabara deeper into the area known as the high plateaux and eventually into the Itombwe forest, in Mwenga territory. The ability of RED-Tabara to continue to carry out attacks in the mid-plateaux – an area largely inhabited by members of the Bafutiro ethnic group, located far from its bases in the high plateaux – highlights how the group uses alliances with Bafutiro armed groups, such as Mai-Mai Ilunga, to swell its ranks and provide protection and safe passage.

Burundian soldiers and Imbonerakure said that they were attacked in the Rusizi plain on multiple occasions, in some cases very soon after they arrived in the DRC. They were unprepared for these attacks, which resulted in numerous deaths. RED-Tabara acknowledged that its troops fought Burundian soldiers on 4 January 2022 near Kigoma, west of the Rusizi plain, and claimed its troops had “blocked” the Burundian military near the Rusizi river. A Burundian soldier said Burundian troops were ambushed upon arrival in the first week of January near the town of Sange, near the Rusizi plain, and several soldiers and Imbonerakure were captured. Another soldier, who escaped the ambush, told him that RED-Tabara had captured them and killed the Imbonerakure. Nibigira confirmed that RED-Tabara had captured soldiers and Imbonerakure, but denied that they executed them.

According to a soldier who participated in the operation, most of the Burundian soldiers who died in the DRC were killed on the battlefield; a smaller number sustained gunshot or shrapnel wounds and succumbed to their injuries because of a lack of adequate medical equipment, facilities and

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54 Interview with Burundian soldier, 20 April 2022.
55 Interview with Jean Claude Nibigira, military chief-of-staff of RED-Tabara, 10 June 2022.
56 Information from Congolese human rights defender, 12 May 2022.
58 Interview with Burundian soldier, 20 April 2022.
59 Interview with Jean Claude Nibigira, military chief-of-staff of RED-Tabara, 10 June 2022.
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trained medical staff. Some were killed in clashes between their Congolese armed group collaborators and FARDC soldiers in April and May 2022, while others were shot dead as they tried to loot cattle to feed fellow soldiers. An Imbonerakure estimated that dozens of Imbonerakure, as well as some soldiers, were killed when Congolese soldiers and armed cowherds shot at them when they were trying to steal cows. There were also reports that several soldiers drowned in the Rusizi river while trying to cross the border.

Some Imbonerakure were unfamiliar with military behaviour or orders. A soldier who spent three months in the DRC was told that Imbonerakure killed some Burundian soldiers in friendly-fire incidents, when they fought in close quarters with each other. “On the battlefield, (Imbonerakure) didn’t understand military commands,” he said. “They don’t understand the technical terms.”

The Burundian authorities gave very little information to the families of those killed in the DRC. A woman said that military officials called her family to inform them that one of her relatives (a soldier) had been killed and that his body was at a military camp. “He had three holes in his forehead,” she said, after later seeing his dead body. “During his burial… a military official said that the dead soldier was sent on a mission outside the country, but that he was killed on the battlefield ‘in the country.’” The statement caused confusion among the family, but nobody dared ask for clarification. The woman was also angry at the way the soldier was buried. The coffin was covered with earth, but the grave wasn’t sealed with cement or built in a dignified manner. “We couldn’t believe that this was a soldier from the national army that they were burying… and one who died on the battlefield, according to what they said.”

The Burundian military kept the bodies of dead soldiers in a shed near the Congolese town of Sange until they were taken back to Burundi by boat. Many ended up at a makeshift morgue at Camp DCA (Défense contre l’avion), also known as Guantanamo, in Bujumbura province, or were taken to morgues at the main hospitals in Bujumbura before being buried.

BHRI received conflicting accounts of whether the bodies of Imbonerakure killed in battle were repatriated to Burundi. An Imbonerakure said he saw some dead Imbonerakure transported across the Rusizi river to Burundi. Another said: “Only the bodies of the bosses (military leaders) or Imbonerakure with high positions of responsibility are evacuated to Burundi. The rest are left on the battlefield where they are eaten by crows.”

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60 Interview with Burundian soldier, 20 April 2022.
61 Information from confidential source, 4 May 2022.
62 Information from confidential source, 14 and 20 April 2022.
63 Information from Imbonerakure, 31 May 2022.
65 Interview with Imbonerakure, 20 April 2022.
66 Interview with confidential source, 1 April 2022.
67 Interview with confidential source, 27 April 2022.
68 Interview with Imbonerakure, 13 May 2022.
Another Imbonerakure believed that the number of Imbonerakure killed during the operation was higher than the number of soldiers. “The military send us ahead. We are the guides. That’s why more of us die... They tell us to go and see where the RED-Tabara rebels are. When we go, we can be captured, then killed. No one comes to tell the others what happened. When Imbonerakure leave and don’t come back for several hours, we assume they’ve been caught and killed.” He said that those killed when trying to loot food or cattle were buried in the DRC.69

According to one Imbonerakure, local authorities in at least one province in Burundi prevented families from holding mourning ceremonies for Imbonerakure killed in the DRC and watched over them to make sure they didn’t hold funerals or other ceremonies.70

Growing resentment among Imbonerakure

Some Imbonerakure have become angry with the way they were treated during the military operation in the DRC as well as with the Burundian authorities’ perceived lack of recognition for the role they played. Imbonerakure were given strict orders not to speak about their mission, but some were so aggrieved when they returned to Burundi that they wanted to talk about their experience, albeit confidentially.

Some felt they had been misled or deceived. Others felt abandoned. An Imbonerakure who was injured in the DRC said: “I’m trying to get medical treatment for my injury... It happened during the fighting, but I have to pay for the treatment myself. The authorities don’t help at all.”71 Another questioned whether it was worth continuing in “this movement” as he was not earning anything and was putting his life at risk.72

An Imbonerakure who was part of the first wave sent to the DRC in December 2021 complained that he and others in his group had not been paid the money they were promised. “Nobody is happy,” he said. “(The Imbonerakure I left with) have suggested going to the (local) CNDD-FDD headquarters and demonstrating in order to claim what is owed to us, our salary that we never received.”73 Others were angry at the lack of preparation for the mission they had been assigned, as well as at the harsh conditions and insufficient food and medicine.

Another Imbonerakure was initially happy to be sent to the DRC. He thought he could get rich from looting and from trading minerals, and hoped that the government might reward him for taking part in the operation. None of that happened. He said that the Imbonerakure he knew had returned from

69 Interview with Imbonerakure, 31 May 2022.
70 Interview with local resident, 29 April 2022. See also Radio publique africaine, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ev1jrwjR2z0, 22 January 2022.
71 Interview with Imbonerakure, 13 May 2022.
72 Information from Imbonerakure, 20 January 2022.
73 Information from conversation with Imbonerakure, 23 January 2022.
the DRC exhausted, weak and poor. Some had left their home area in Burundi for fear of being sent back to the DRC.\textsuperscript{74}

Some \textit{Imbonerakure} are still reeling from the shock of seeing their friends die or suffer serious injuries. An \textit{Imbonerakure} who spent three months in the DRC was traumatised by the events that he witnessed and questioned the purpose of the operation: “What I experienced there has left me with psychological problems. Some of my friends died. Others have gone blind or lost their legs... We ask ourselves: why? We don’t understand why... Everyone is traumatised. When some \textit{Imbonerakure} came back, their feet barely touched Burundian soil before they immediately fled the country... Some (\textit{Imbonerakure}) were used to this kind of thing, but others were new to the fighting.”\textsuperscript{75} Another \textit{Imbonerakure}, who had spent around a month in the DRC, said that if he were asked to return, he would refuse to do so and would leave the country.\textsuperscript{76}

\section{5. GOVERNMENT DENIALS}

In early January 2022, Floribert Biyereke, Burundi’s military spokesperson, categorically denied that Burundian military were present in the DRC: “It’s not true. There are no Burundian military in the DRC. The Burundian army doesn’t operate in the DRC. It only covers the national territory. No soldier can dare go and intervene in another country without an agreement between the two countries.”\textsuperscript{77}

Three weeks later, it was the turn of minister of defence Alain Tribert Mutabazi, accompanied by Prime Niyongabo, chief-of-staff of the National Defence Force of Burundi (\textit{Force de défense nationale du Burundi}, FDNB), to deny that the Burundian military was present in the DRC. In response to a journalist’s question during a press conference on 28 January 2022, he dismissed the allegations as “rumours”.

“We have also heard about this information on social media and from various media such as international radio stations,” said Mutabazi. “What I would like to say is that the Burundian army remains bound by the rules that govern it. As stipulated by law, the Burundian army didn’t send men to the DRC. Moreover, we have a very good collaboration with the Congolese army and it has never complained. The FDNB only intervenes in the framework of joint operations recognized by the EAC (East African Community), the AU (African Union) or the United Nations. And that is never done secretly.”\textsuperscript{78}

\begin{itemize}
\item[74] Interview with \textit{Imbonerakure}, 31 May 2022.
\item[75] Interview with \textit{Imbonerakure}, 13 May 2022.
\item[76] Interview with \textit{Imbonerakure}, 13 April 2022.
\end{itemize}
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Yet by this time, many Burundian soldiers and Imbonerakure had already crossed into the DRC. Moreover, on 15 January 2022, Burundian soldiers, Imbonerakure and members of Gumino had attacked Kitoga village in the high plateaux – an area in which RED-Tabara and its allies operated – and reportedly killed dozens of civilians there; they also burned houses and looted and destroyed local infrastructure and equipment.79

The Burundian government has privately referred to its operation as a “joint operation” with the Congolese security forces.80 An operations agreement in 2021 between the UN mission in the DRC (known as MONUSCO) and the Congolese government stated that the FARDC could conduct joint operations with security forces from neighbouring countries including Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. A UN official, however, said that FARDC “soldiers on the ground are not very happy with the Burundian military presence. They complain that they have not received instructions from Kinshasa about how to deal with this situation. If there has been an agreement at national level, it hasn’t filtered down to the local level… Mostly, it appears that the FARDC just allow the Burundian army to do what they want. These are not joint operations, unlike with the Ugandans, for example.”81 It is more like a laissez-passer by the FARDC to let the Burundian military track down Burundian armed groups.”82

By hiding the truth from the public and avoiding democratic scrutiny, the government is also violating the Burundian constitution. Not only has it ignored the legal obligation for its armed forces to be accountable and transparent, but it failed to inform parliament about the operations in the DRC, despite the requirement to provide information, “promptly and in a detailed manner”, on the reason, the location and the period during which the armed forces are being deployed.83

6. WHO IS RED-TABARA?

RED-Tabara has been present in eastern DRC for several years. It is currently the most active Burundian armed opposition group, as others appear to have folded, suffered internal divisions or lost their relevance in recent years.

RED-Tabara was created in 2011, in the aftermath of the 2010 elections in Burundi, which the group deemed fraudulent. It gathered strength in 2015, during and after large public protests against President Pierre Nkurunziza’s decision to run for a third term. Many of the original RED-Tabara members had links to the opposition party Movement for Solidarity and Democracy (Mouvement pour la solidarité et la démocratie, MSD), which played a major role in the 2015 protest movement.

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79 Interview with member of Congolese civil society organisation, 18 January 2022; interview with European diplomat, 11 May 2022; interview with UN official, 16 May 2022; confidential report, 3 March 2022. Burundian soldiers, Imbonerakure and members of Gumino attacked Kitoga again on 30 January and 26 February 2022 and looted cows, crops and other belongings.
80 Interview with diplomat in Bujumbura, 25 May 2022; interview with UN officials, 10 April 2022.
81 On 9 December 2021, Uganda and the DRC signed a defence and security agreement that allowed the Ugandan army to enter the DRC for joint operations to dismantle the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an armed group of Ugandan origin.
82 Interview with UN official, 10 April 2022.
83 Constitution of Burundi, 7 June 2018, articles 249 and 256.
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and has been banned by the government; RED-Tabara is still seen as close to exiled MSD leader Alexis Sinduhije. They were joined by radicalised members of the 2015 protest movement and some members of the military involved in or sympathetic to the failed coup d’état of May 2015. In 2016, a RED-Tabara leader said that its goal was to remove “Nkurunziza and his gang”.84

RED-Tabara was supported by Rwanda in 2015 and early 2016, at a time when relations between Rwanda and Burundi were at an all-time low. Since 2015, the two countries have accused each other of supporting their opponents. BHRI was unable to confirm whether RED-Tabara still receives support from Rwanda or other external sources.

To consolidate its presence in the DRC and ensure its survival, RED-Tabara has collaborated with Congolese armed groups in South Kivu, in particular Mai-Mai Ilunga. Taking advantage of a security vacuum in the areas where they operate, these Congolese groups have used this alliance in an opportunistic way to further their own interests in the conflicts in the mid and high plateaux and the Rusizi plain; they have little concern for RED-Tabara’s political agenda in Burundi.85 RED-Tabara has denied collaborating with these groups.86

RED-Tabara has also denied having contacts with another Burundian armed group still operating in the DRC, a former faction of the FNL, led by Aloys Nzabampema. In 2011, Nzabampema broke away from the main branch of the FNL, which had turned from an armed group into a political party. His group was the main target of previous operations by SNR agents, military and Imbonerakure in the DRC. In 2022, the FNL-Nzabampema appears to have been considerably weakened. Some sources allege that Nzabampema has begun collaborating with the Burundian intelligence service, which could explain why the Burundian army has not made his group the main focus of its the current operation.87

Armed attacks in Burundi

In 2020 and 2021, a number of armed attacks took place in Burundi, some near the border with the DRC, others in the centre of the country or other locations; in most cases, the identity of the assailants remains unconfirmed. RED-Tabara claimed responsibility for several of these attacks, including a mortar attack near Bujumbura airport in September 2021.88 It also stated that it fought the Burundian security forces and Imbonerakure in Bugarama commune (Rumonge province) in

86 Interview with Jean Claude Nibigira, military chief-of-staff of RED-Tabara, 10 June 2022.
87 Interview with former Burundian army and FNL commander, 27 March 2022.
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August 2021, in Mugamba commune (Bururi province) in September 2021 and in the Rukoko forest after the airport attack. RED-Tabara combatants who participated in an attack in 2020 said they crossed into Burundi in a group of 70 to 80 combatants and waged intense battles with the Burundian army. Some of these attacks resulted in casualties among Burundian soldiers and Imbonerakure as well as killings, abductions and other human rights abuses by RED-Tabara combatants against Burundian civilians. Others, such as the attack on the airport, inflicted little damage but spoiled the government’s attempts to portray Burundi as a peaceful country. RED-Tabara’s chief-of-staff denied that the group had ever killed civilians.

Despite these attacks, RED-Tabara’s capacity to cause large-scale or sustained insecurity in Burundi appears to be limited. “It’s a movement that has reached its final lap,” observed a former Burundian army officer. RED-Tabara’s chief-of-staff refused to say how many combatants it had in June 2022. He claimed that the reality on the ground proved that they were capable of fighting and winning, and said that the majority of their weapons were seized from the Burundi army.

The level of support for RED-Tabara inside Burundi also appears to have waned over the years, although it is difficult to gauge it accurately, since people cannot openly express their sympathies with the group. But after decades of deadly armed conflict, followed by a prolonged crisis in Burundi since 2015, few Burundians appear ready to support the prospect of another armed struggle.

Nevertheless, the SNR has deployed significant efforts to identify potential suspects and their collaborators in Burundi. Hundreds of people with suspected links to RED-Tabara and other armed opposition groups have been arrested or abducted since 2020, often in the absence of clear evidence against them; many were previously known for their political opposition to the CNDD-FDD. Most of those arrested were initially detained at the SNR, where some were tortured to extract confessions or other information; some died as a result of torture. Most were later transferred to prison. Others have never been seen again.

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89 See RED-Tabara communiqués, https://twitter.com/Red_Tabara/status/1297561282867060736, https://twitter.com/Red_Tabara/status/1441713641745702913/photo/1 and https://twitter.com/RED_Tabara/status/1439582858985840650/photo/1. BHRI confirmed the presence of RED-Tabara combatants and clashes with the army in September 2021. At least one RED-Tabara combatant was captured in Bururi and tortured by the SNR.

90 Interview with former RED-Tabara combatants, 28 January and 14 February 2022.


92 Interview with Jean Claude Nibigira, military chief-of-staff of RED-Tabara, 10 June 2022.

93 Interview with former military officer, 11 April 2022.

94 Interview with Jean Claude Nibigira, military chief-of-staff of RED-Tabara, 10 June 2022.

7. QUESTION MARKS OVER STRATEGY

Many Burundians and other observers have struggled to understand why the Burundian army decided to launch such a lengthy and costly operation in the DRC at a time when its main adversary, RED-Tabara, did not seem to pose a significant threat. Unlike previous Burundian military ventures into the DRC, the current operation has involved prolonged and sustained fighting. RED-Tabara’s chief-of-staff said that in the past, Burundian soldiers would come for two or three months, then return to Burundi. “But now, they have set up in the field and they’re not going back… It’s continued combat.”

The Burundian government’s decision to launch this operation therefore seems less related to the objective strength of its adversaries than to its own vision and perceptions. RED-Tabara remains a bête noire of CNDD-FDD hardliners who still view it as a threat to their hold on power and may believe that Rwanda is using RED-Tabara as a proxy force to establish a foothold in areas of South Kivu, in eastern DRC. Despite securing victories in the last three sets of elections and maintaining control over the country, the CNDD-FDD’s paranoia has persisted, as evidenced by its violent repression of opponents and critics, even those who have not taken up arms. This paranoia was heightened by the wave of public support for the main opposition party, the National Freedom Congress (Congrès national pour la liberté, CNL) in the lead-up to the 2020 elections. The government lashed out not only at CNL members, but at anyone perceived as not supporting the CNDD-FDD or vaguely suspected of links with armed groups. The repression has continued since 2020 to prevent the CNDD-FDD’s political or armed opponents from regrouping – a strategy also deployed after the 2010 and 2015 elections, when some of the worst political violence took place once the government’s opponents had been defeated.

In practice, given the Burundian army’s limited resources and the Imbonerakure’s lack of preparation and training, the current operation may not succeed in completely defeating RED-Tabara. Instead, the army has tried to dislodge it from its bases and drive its fighters deeper into remote areas of eastern DRC from where they are less likely or able to carry out incursions into Burundi or recruit additional members inside the country. “It’s a war of attrition”, said a former Burundian army officer, previously with the FNL. “Fight the enemy outside to weaken it before it can enter Burundi.” Meanwhile, RED-Tabara has used its knowledge of the area and local alliances to either avoid armed confrontations or to attack Burundian soldiers and Imbonerakure.

The Burundian government may also have wanted to thwart RED-Tabara’s occasional attacks in Burundi that aim to undermine the government’s rhetoric that the country is at peace. In their public speeches and meetings with international actors, President Ndayishimiye and other government officials have repeatedly emphasized that the country is now peaceful. However, the reality is that RED-Tabara continues to pose a threat, and the government’s actions to address this threat have been contentious and controversial.

96 Interview with Jean Claude Nibigira, military chief-of-staff of RED-Tabara, 10 June 2022.
97 See Human Rights Watch, “You will not have peace while you are living: the escalation of political violence in Burundi”, https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/05/02/you-will-not-have-peace-while-you-are-living/escalation-political-violence, May 2012.
98 Interview with former army officer and former FNL member, 27 March 2022.
officials have repeatedly stressed that there is security throughout Burundi. Attacks by RED-Tabara or other armed groups do not fit the image that they are trying to portray of a stable country and a government that is able to defend its borders.

8. **“THE CNDD-FDD IS BURUNDI”**

The longer-term objectives of the military operation in the DRC become clearer when viewed alongside the CNDD-FDD’s mobilisation efforts taking place inside Burundi. It is also striking that some of the well-known figures in the hardline wing of the party – such as Ndikuriyo and Ndayizeye – and SNR agents who have been at the forefront of the violent repression in Burundi – such as Museremu and Niyonzima – were involved in preparing the operation in the DRC, illustrating their positions of power and the central role that they play.

While President Ndayishimiye travels around the world meeting heads of state and reviving Burundi’s relationships with international actors, certain members of the former military wing of the CNDD-FDD – the original FDD – appear to be gaining strength. Civilian government officials – such as the minister of defence, Alain Tribert Mutabazi – have very little influence. The involvement of *Imbonerakure* in the operation in the DRC is a symptom of an increasing militarisation, as is the move towards formalising their role in security duties in Burundi.

In the first half of 2022, while the military operation in the DRC was ongoing, CNDD-FDD leaders embarked on a large-scale campaign designed to secure their party’s long-term dominance across the country. Révérien Ndikuriyo, Secretary General of the CNDD-FDD and a key figure in the hardline wing of the party, toured Burundi’s provinces and addressed gatherings of *Imbonerakure* and other CNDD-FDD members in several locations in April and May 2022. In animated speeches delivered in typically coded language, he appealed to the *Imbonerakure* to fulfil their patriotic duties, contribute to the country’s security and shore up the CNDD-FDD’s position as the dominant, or only, party in Burundi.

In a speech in Nyabiraba, Bujumbura province, on 7 May 2022, for example, he declared:

“We are satisfied with the peace and security in our country... (But) just because there is peace, it doesn’t mean that there are no enemies. The country is calm but the enemy is there. This is why we say we should always be vigilant and not rest on our laurels... When there is peace in a country, there are people who grind their teeth... We will give them the treatment they deserve... We will position ourselves in such a way that they won’t be able to disturb us. We thank the league of young *Imbonerakure* who are following the instructions we gave them... Dear party members, dear *Imbonerakure*... we want to start reorganising you and we ask you to respect the instructions. You are the future of this country.”

He then announced, to much applause: “Dear CNDD-FDD party members, this party, we can’t even call it a party. We can consider it a country. The CNDD-FDD is Burundi.” He went on to say: “We
want our party, the CNDD-FDD, to hold a dominant place across the national territory before we celebrate our 20 years in power in 2025. We have three years left.” He reminded his audience: “We are in full swing. We want 24,000 Imbonerakure to have attended improvement (training) courses before the next elections.”

In another speech in Kirundo province on 31 May 2022, Ndikuriyo told Imbonerakure from Kirundo and Muyinga provinces: “We will give you instructions. We will need you in the future... Be active. Otherwise, you will lose control of the country. You should position yourselves well and defend the country.”

In a meeting with CNDD-FDD leaders and Imbonerakure in Bubanza in April, Ndikuriyo was more blunt:

“This commune is behaving well. No criminals are crossing this border... even those who haven’t been chased out have been allowed to enter so they can’t escape, so they perish inside. We call that ‘perishing’... How many of them are there? One, two, 10? to know the number of bullets we will use, because one bullet corresponds to one criminal... For now, there’s no question of missing the target. Even soldiers don’t need a lot of bullets. Let them count the number of enemies in the area and prepare the number of bullets that corresponds to these enemies. One (enemy), one bullet, that’s all.”

A person who attended the meeting said he was so afraid he couldn’t sleep after hearing Ndikuriyo’s speech. He remembered him saying: “Imbonerakure shiriraaaa...” Be careful and be vigilant... A while ago, I was accused of saying something bad, I was accused of hate speech... Even now, I say it and I repeat it: there’s no question of someone being an obstacle. No question of (someone) doing us harm like in 2015. Kill him. Cut his throat. Eliminate him.”

Apparently picking up on rumblings of discontent in the party rank and file, Ndikuriyo made clear that no dissent would not be tolerated. In some of his speeches, he told Imbonerakure to be “obedient”; he warned them that he would “block all attempts that do not follow (our) directives” and that “those who don’t implement our instructions will have problems with us.”

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100 Extracts from translation of Révérien Ndikuriyo’s speech to CNDD-FDD members from Kirundo and Muyinga provinces, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pg6lyoQAnI, 31 May 2022.
101 Extracts from translation of Révérien Ndikuriyo’s speech to CNDD-FDD members in Bubanza, 27 April 2022.
102 Shirira is an expression in Kirundi often used by CNDD-FDD leaders to fire up their members.
103 A reference to criticism of comments made by Ndikuriyo in September 2019, when he was president of the Senate. Ndikuriyo had offered 5 million Burundian francs (approximately US$2,430) to bring him a wanted man known as Kaburimbo “alive or dead”. Kaburimbo was killed by members of the security services on 15 April 2020.
104 Information from CNDD-FDD member, 28 April 2022. The quote is the witness’s recollection of parts of Ndikuriyo’s speech, not a literal transcript.
Ndikuriyo’s rallying cry coincided with a training programme on “patriotism” for *Imbonerakure* across the country. Training sessions, including ideological training and physical exercises, have been organised for *Imbonerakure* many times in the past. This time, the training had a more formal dimension. Those who completed it received a printed certificate bearing the party logo and signed by Ndikuriyo. A certificate awarded to an *Imbonerakure* trained in Rumonge province from 16 to 20 May 2022 states that the course covered the history of Burundi, the background of the armed struggle for democracy, a code of conduct for party members, how to love your country and make others love it, how to defend peace and security and formulate development plans.106

Some of the training had a clear political message. A relative of an *Imbonerakure* who was trained in May at the CNDD-FDD provincial headquarters said that *Imbonerakure* were instructed “to oppose all those who are opposition members, to love only one political party and to make sure there is no other political party... anyone who isn’t a member of their party should be considered an enemy of the nation, a coloniser.”107

**A new military reserve force**

On 11 April 2022, the National Assembly unanimously adopted a draft law on the FDNB, which, among other things, creates a new reserve force, known as *Force de réserve et d’appui au développement* (FRAD).108 At the time of writing, the law has not yet been enacted.

The draft law describes the FRAD as “an entity devoted to patriotic leadership and support to development”. Its duties include “organising paramilitary training in the framework of patriotic leadership” and “supporting other components in protecting the integrity of the national territory”. It will be composed of “citizens who have been trained militarily for this purpose by the FDNB and former serving military for a maximum of two years after the age of retirement.” The reservists can be mobilised in times of war to reinforce the FDNB on the national territory and acquire military status when they are mobilised.109

Many Burundians view the creation of the FRAD as a thinly-veiled attempt to create a parallel armed force comprised of *Imbonerakure*, thereby formalising their participation in security duties – a reasonable assumption given the central role *Imbonerakure* have played in this regard for some time, albeit unofficially.110 For several years, some *Imbonerakure* have been given weapons and

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106 Photograph of certificate, received on 21 May 2022.
107 Confidential testimony, May 2022.
109 “Projet de loi organique portant modification de la loi organique no.1/04 du 20 février 2017 portant missions, organisation, instructions, conditions de service et fonctionnement de la Force de défense nationale du Burundi” (April 2022).
have been involved in local law enforcement duties, alongside the security forces, intelligence service and local government authorities. *Imbonerakure* have no official powers of arrest or other law enforcement functions, so these activities have taken place outside the framework of the law. They have frequently arrested or abducted suspected government opponents and ill-treated or killed detainees, usually with impunity.

The creation of the FRAD may be an attempt to remove legal obstacles to arming and providing military training to the *Imbonerakure*, in preparation for their deployment inside or outside Burundi’s borders. It also appears to put an end to earlier attempts by President Ndayishimiye to stop *Imbonerakure* from becoming involved in security duties, illustrating his inability or unwillingness to stand up to hardline members of his party or to influence the *Imbonerakure*’s conduct in a lasting way.111

Some sources believe that the FRAD may also be an attempt by the government to create a solidly pro-CNDD-FDD force on which it could depend for protection or for sensitive missions. There are deep divisions in the Burundian army, particularly since the failed military coup of 2015, with distrust between some CNDD-FDD members of the military and members of the former Burundian armed forces (ex-FAB), whom they suspect of sympathies with the opposition. The FRAD, whose members could be handpicked from a pool of trusted party members, might therefore constitute a more loyal, reliable force.

This theory was given credence by a local *Imbonerakure* representative who said the CNDD-FDD had begun planning recruitment for the new force several months before the draft law was tabled. Following a meeting of provincial party leaders at the national CNDD-FDD headquarters in December 2021, provincial *Imbonerakure* leaders told local *Imbonerakure* leaders to identify trusted members of the youth league, “the real faces of the party”, to take part in a future project, details of which would be communicated later. This was assumed to mean the new reserve force.

The local *Imbonerakure* representative believed that one of the objectives of the new force would be to provide work to *Imbonerakure* and demobilised CNDD-FDD combatants, as it had become difficult to manage them; demobilised combatants complained about not receiving state benefits, while many *Imbonerakure* are unemployed. But the plan apparently also had political objectives: to deal with the threat posed by RED-Tabara and to prevent the CNL from posing any real challenge to the CNDD-FDD before the next legislative elections in 2025.112

Another local *Imbonerakure* representative said that the CNDD-FDD would keep a list of *Imbonerakure* recruited into the regular army and police so that they could be on call to train future members of the FRAD, “so we know they will implement the party’s policies.”113

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112 Interview with *Imbonerakure* representative, May 2022.
113 Interview with *Imbonerakure* representative, 5 June 2022.
A local CNDD-FDD official appeared to confirm that *Imbonerakure* would be recruited into the FRAD; he said they would benefit from its creation as they would receive a salary. In addition to sending them to the DRC, the CNDD-FDD would use the *Imbonerakure* as necessary in the next elections “because we know that the rebels will disturb our security at any time”. He added that whenever there was a recruitment process for the security forces, posts would be reserved for *Imbonerakure*, and these *Imbonerakure* “should be deployed to specific camps so that the party can easily find them when it needs them”.

**Preparing for electoral victory**

The combination of these developments over a period of a few months signals the start of a concerted campaign by the CNDD-FDD to further tighten its hold on power and deal with potential opponents (whether armed or unarmed) long before the 2025 parliamentary elections and the 2027 presidential election.

The CNDD-FDD started laying the groundwork almost as soon as the 2020 elections were over. While the operation in the DRC has taken place amidst a precarious calm in many parts of Burundi, Burundians remain concerned about the future. They worry about the militarisation of the *Imbonerakure*, the incendiary rhetoric by Révérien Ndikuriyo, a worsening economic situation and a ruling party that exerts control over many facets of daily life. These worries are accentuated by a lack of trust in a government that often relies on deception or denial when questioned or confronted with facts, whether about the army’s actions in the DRC or the role of state agents in human rights violations.

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114 Interview with local CNDD-FDD official, 4 June 2022.