

WIDE ANGLE

ONE DAY WITH YOUTH IN MAHAMA REFUGEE CAMP



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Author: **Martina Gastaldello** (UN online volunteer)

Editing: **Maria Rente** (UN online volunteer)

Graphic design: **Vilmar Luiz** (UN online volunteer)

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L'Osservatorio - Research centre on civilian victims of conflict

Via Marche, 54

00187 Rome - Italy

For further information and feedback, please contact:

 [**@OsservatorioOrg**](https://twitter.com/OsservatorioOrg)

 [**losservatorio.org**](https://www.facebook.com/losservatorio.org)

 [**info@losservatorio.org**](mailto:info@losservatorio.org)

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The political crisis in which Burundi has been escalating since April 2015 has caused the internal and external displacement of over 400,000 individuals. Of those displaced, 85,000 of them live as refugees in Rwanda, mainly in Mahama camp, located at the border with Tanzania, 270km away from the capital, Kigali. For the past two years, Mahama has been home to 50,000 men, women and children. Their survival depends entirely on humanitarian aid, being provided daily by over 40 non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies. Many of these individuals are youth, of an age comprised between 20 and 28 years old; all their dreams and ambitions were crushed as soon as they fled Burundi to become refugees in another country.

But what does it really mean to be a young refugee in Mahama? This article, is the result of a day spent by the author in the largest refugee camp in Rwanda, in an attempt to answer this question through the point of view of nine young men and women who were interviewed by the author. Through this article, the reader will understand why they decided to leave Burundi, as well as get to the heart of their stories, exploring their dreams and their fears.

Key words: Youth, Burundi, refugees, Mahama refugee camp, Rwanda

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A long-cultivated dream: organizing a day in Mahama refugee camp

I went to Mahama refugee camp on the 1st of March 2017, during my last week in Rwanda. After 5 months in the land of a thousand hills, it was time to leave the country I had been dreaming of for a long time, the only one where I could see my career as a humanitarian worker starting, and take on a new challenge somewhere else. I couldn't leave, however, without visiting Mahama camp. Mahama is the largest and youngest refugee camp in Rwanda, home to more than 50,000 Burundian refugees.

Mahama is the only camp in Rwanda that accommodates Burundian refugees. It is well-known, as it is an obliged stop-over of the many famous United Nations Ambassadors who visit Rwanda. To sensitize the public opinion on the living conditions of refugees, and develop donors' awareness of the importance to increase their funding, many United Nations agencies rely on celebrities. The camp visit is possible for private citizens as well, upon authorisation of the Rwandan government, and provided the objective of the visit is clearly explained in the request.

At the time, I was living in Kigali, and I was working for a non-governmental organization, which among other activities, implements projects to support youth. Over the last few months there, while I was working on these projects, I came across a lot of interesting material, including articles and documents that analysed and reflected upon youth as the delicate stage of transition between childhood and adulthood. It is a unique phase in life, during which young boys and girls forge their identity and strive to be recognized as adults in society.¹



The author with the group of youth at the entrance of Mahama camp.

Credit: Martina Gastaldello

During this phase of transition to adulthood, youth are particularly vulnerable and face many challenges. Most of us are lucky enough to have the support of our family, and to live in a safe and protected environment where we can naturally develop our personality and become adults. Unfortunately, this is not the case for everyone. An increasing number of young people find themselves in the middle of an armed conflict, faced by violence and instability, where remaining in their home, village or city becomes too risky, and so they flee.

The phenomenon of displacement comes with additional challenges for these young men and women. Even though most of those who flee their country have been living in a situation of insecurity for a certain amount of time, it is following a sudden escalation of violence, that the decision to flee is taken. In this context, many children and youth decide or are forced to flee alone, leaving their families behind, sometimes permanently.

The dramatic conditions following displacement oblige the youth to quickly adopt adult responsibilities, even if they have not completed the biological, psychological and social development that is conducive to adulthood.² As I was reflecting on this, the purpose of my visit to Mahama camp became very clear to me; I would go there and meet with young men and women around my age (from 20 to 29 years old), to listen to their stories and ask this question: What is it like to be young, for a refugee?

With this in mind, I went to MIDIMAR (the Rwandan Ministry of Disaster Management and Refugee Affairs) and I asked for the authorisation to visit Mahama camp. A week later, my request was approved. I then contacted the Camp Manager to arrange the visit, and I asked him if he could gather dozens of young men and women - ensuring that there would be gender-balance - with whom I would have spent my day.

I tried to prepare myself for the visit, mainly to think about what I would ask them, but the truth is that I had never visited a refugee camp before, and I had never had a heart-to-heart conversation with individuals who escaped violence looking for safety elsewhere, so I did not know what to expect. Thankfully, the amazing individuals I met at Mahama, with whom I am in touch with every day, made this task easier for me.

The journey to Kirehe and some background on the political crisis affecting Burundi

On the 1st of March, the day of my visit finally came. Mahama camp is located 270 km (three hours away) from Kigali, in Kirehe; a district in the Rwanda eastern province. It is a long journey from Kigali, so I decided to take a bus the day before and to stay in Kirehe overnight in the guesthouse hosting the staff of the over 40 between United Nations agencies and NGOs working in the camp from Monday to Friday, and often also during the weekend. During the trip, as I was admiring the beauty of the Rwandan landscape, a feeling of anticipation pervaded me.



Text: A view of Akagera river and the hill separating Rwanda with Tanzania.
Credit: Martina Gastaldello

After three long hours, I finally arrived in Kirehe, and I went to the guesthouse. There, I met with the Camp Manager, who told me about the camp and explained what he had arranged for my day there. The camp was opened on the 22nd of April 2015 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Rwandan government in order to respond to the massive influx of refugees fleeing political violence and social tensions in Burundi.

Burundi, one of the poorest countries in the world³, has been entangled in a deep crisis since April 2015, when the president Pierre Nkurunziza decided to run for a third electoral term. This went against the Constitution⁴ and, more importantly, the will of the population. Shortly after this announcement, protests erupted in the capital, Bujumbura, with intense clashes between protesters and the armed police. In order to silence the opposition and to put pressure on people to support his Party, the President has relied on the Imbonerakure militia, a youth wing of the ruling party.⁵ Since then, the militia have killed, raped, and caused the disappearance of many Burundian citizens.⁶

The political crisis has had repercussions on many levels, triggering a complex economic, social and humanitarian crisis.⁷ As a result, Burundian citizens increasingly face food insecurity, limited access to basic services, and are victims of human rights abuses.

One of the main consequences of the crisis has been the internal displacement of thousands of Burundians, or their relocation to other countries. The fear of political persecution and the reduction of available services have exacerbated the vulnerability of the population, and as a consequence, approximately 414,000 Burundians left their country and now live as refugees in eight Eastern and southern African countries.

Of those externally displaced, 20,6 % of them (85, 345) have moved to Rwanda , and the majority (53,940) live in Mahama camp.⁸ The Burundian refugee population is particularly young, with 46% of them being below 18 years old; approximately half of them are male and the other half are female. While the majority of refugees have been living in the camp since its opening nearly two years ago, others continue to arrive, as the acute political crisis and insecurity in Burundi persists.

An early morning arrival in Mahama camp

For humanitarian workers in Mahama, days are long and begin very early. At 7 a.m., I was in the MIDIMAR car leaving the guesthouse, and on my way to Mahama. During the 40-minute drive towards the camp, through the plain Rwandan landscape around us, I got better acquainted with some of the governmental and NGO staff travelling with us who work in the camp. Despite the challenges they face, they are committed to improving the living conditions in the camp, by expanding access to services and addressing protection concerns.

Finally, shortly before 8 a.m., after a long drive through unpaved roads, we arrived to Mahama. I passed the security check, where I exhibited my permission to enter the 100 hectares of camp that suddenly unfolded in front of me. As it has been opened for almost two years and it regularly welcomes new refugees, the Rwandan government has been working with a wide range of international and local organisations to establish sustainable infrastructures and increase the resilience of the individuals living in it.

This can be seen through the change in shelter. In the beginning, refugees were accommodated in tents and communal hangars. The schools, toilet structures, health posts and community centres were provided in temporary structures, mostly made of plastic. Nowadays the camp is being transformed into something more permanent, and the construction of shelters made of mud brick has been on going over the past months.

Given the medium/long-term nature of displacement, the response of the humanitarian partners aims at ensuring sustainability. Thus, in the camp there is a primary and secondary school, health centres, two functioning markets, a playground and recreational activities for children and the youth, a library, and a bus service. Despite the efforts to make life return to as much normalcy as possible, a refugee's' life is still far from being easy. In addition to the trauma they endured and the psychological distress the displacement causes them, the scarcity of resources and limited livelihood opportunities can prevent them from looking at the future with confidence.

To a large extent, these challenges are common to all refugees that live in Mahama; however, I was there to hear the point of view of only one category of the population, the youth. I wanted to hear their stories and understand their dreams and aspirations as young men and women who are struggling to become independent adults. My hope was that, by giving voice to them, there would be more understanding of their needs, especially in a camp setting, and in turn, they will benefit from an increased support from humanitarian partners and solidarity networks alike.

The encounter with youth

After a brief visit with the Camp Management and Coordination officers, it was time for me to meet with the group of youth. I was very impatient and I hoped I would be able to live up to their expectations. Very soon, there they were: a small group of young men and women wearing t-shirts which said 'Mahama English Club' arrived outside the office of the Camp Manager. I greeted them and we immediately started to talk while we waited for the group to be complete. Shortly afterwards, the Camp Manager accompanied us to the room where we would have spent our morning.

There, during three long hours of in-depth and touching conversation, I got to know the lives of nine brilliant young men and women, in their twenties; Cyriaque, Jean Bosco, Salvator, Sonia, Ange-Georgine, Jean Paul, Odette, Beatrice and Jean Calvin. Before arriving to Mahama, the nine of them didn't know each other. Life in the camp has united them in a unique bond; a friendship that keeps them going day after day, because they know they can count on each other, and will get through this together.

They were brave enough to look into their past and their painful memories and recall their life story. I took the time to listen to each one of them, because for as much as they have in common, I believe each story is unique and deserves to be told. In spite of what they have been through, and even if in some moment finding hope was hard, not for a moment they have stopped believing in a better future. They are grateful to be alive and to have each other, and they believe in a better future. I am grateful to them for trusting in me and opening up as much as they did, even though it cost them to do so. What follows is a recount of their stories.



The author with the youth at the beginning of the group discussion.

Credit: Martina Gastaldello

Memories of a difficult journey from Burundi to Rwanda

Cyriaque (25), is the first one who courageously started to speak. He explains how life in Burundi has been permeated by a climate of ethnic divide, residual of the violence that erupted in 1993 between the Hutu majority and the Tutsi minority, causing the death of 300,000 people. Despite the fact that the story of his country has been characterized by repeated outburst of violence, he didn't imagine that the situation would have precipitated further. The events of April 2015, however, proved him wrong.

Following the announcement by the ruling party (Conseil National Pour la Defence de la Democratie) in April 2015, that President Pierre Nkurunziza would run for a third electoral mandate, civil protests erupted in the capital, Bujumbura. As a result of this, the youth decided to protest their lack of freedom, which prevented the society from being fully democratic. They organized and participated in public demonstrations, which the government repressed with the use of force, by relying on the Imbonerakure militia (who, as Cyriaque explains, are former rebels now constituting the youth wing of the ruling party). In addition to this, those who were identified as opponents of the regime were persecuted.



Text: Shade area and construction of durable shelter behind.
Credit: Martina Gastaldello

The fear of persecution became reality for Cyriaque. One day, while he was at school, the Imbonerakure went to his home to kill his father, who was considered an opponent. Luckily, his father was able to escape by giving money to the Chief of the militia; however, the fear that this could happen again made the family decide to leave immediately. They ran to the border with Rwanda, where they paid 5,000 RWF (almost \$5) to the border authorities, as they didn't have any of the identification required to cross the border. Once in Rwanda, they went to the transit centre, and shortly after they relocated to Mahama, where they have been living since.

For **Jean-Bosco**, who is 28 years old, the memories are similar. He explained how the President's refusal to give away his power, caused the discontent of his citizens. Even though they manifested peacefully, the militia used force to ill-treat and shoot civilians. For him, as for most, the decision to flee came at the heavy cost of being separated from his family. While he is now in Rwanda, and some of his brothers and sisters are in Uganda, his mother and another sister remained in Burundi. He worries for his family's financial well-being, as he used to help in this aspect. Now that he is unable to do so, he is concerned no one is able to provide for them. Additionally, the militia continue to threaten his family. He is afraid of going back to Burundi, and he wonders if he will be able to see his loved ones again.

When it was his turn to speak, **Salvator** said that he doesn't accept any ethnic divide, because *'You can't be considered a Hutu or Tutsi and your life be dependent on it. People are people'*. Salvator is one of the youngest of the group, he is only 20, and fleeing was very difficult for him. To prevent him from leaving, the militia ran after him, but he managed to hide in a bush and jump on a tree. He was very tired, but giving up was not an option. Finally, he was out of their sight, and was able to cross the border with Rwanda, where he reached the UNHCR transit centre and was then directed towards the camp. He arrived alone and hungry, and his first memory is of someone giving him a sweet potato, which makes him smile and say *'Friendship is the one thing we can all count on'*.

Sonia, who is 28, lost her parents in 1993; they were killed during the ethnic cleansing in Burundi. Since then, her life hasn't been easy. In April 2015, her husband who was part of the opposition, took part in the manifestations in Bujumbura. At the time, Sonia and her husband had a 3 years old child. The whole family was in danger, as militia followed them every day, threatening to kill them. Fearing for their lives and that of their child, they decided to flee. The day they escaped, the militia went to their house and when they didn't find them, they destroyed it. With little personal belongings and no ID (as they didn't have time to collect them), they had problems crossing the border, until Sonia met an old friend who helped them.

In the camp, Sonia is not alone. Apart from her husband, she found many friends she can trust. Among them, there is **Ange-Georgine**. Back in Burundi, in April 2015, Anne-Georgine (who is now 25), was aware that the political tensions were not over, but could not have imagined that the situation would have precipitated. One day she was at home when militia came and announced that all tutsi would be killed. *'I thought my day had come'*. Leaving the country was very difficult, and she was scared of leaving without any papers. Eventually, she didn't have any other option. *'The day I left, it was very difficult, but I still went for it, and I knew I couldn't go back.'*

The story of **Jean-Paul** highlights another aspect of being a refugee, and namely the difficulties that come with interrupting one's study. When the political crisis became violent, Jean-Paul was 23 years old. He was studying in another town, when he received a call and was informed that all his family was gone following repeated threats by the militia. Scared and alone, he turned to his uncle, who offered to help him leave the country. However, Jean-Paul was reluctant to leave as he hadn't finished

his studies, which meant a lot for him. *‘Eventually, I agreed to leave, but it was very hard, and I was angry because I had to interrupt my studies. I wanted to keep studying and go to University, and I dream to achieve a degree and set up my business.’*

Jean-Calvin, who is 25 years old, went through a similar experience. When he was in Burundi, he was about to finish his studies. He remembers how his teacher encouraged him and his classmates to support the government party. The situation had become unbearable, even in school, so he decided to leave. He escaped on foot, with his backpack and one bag on his head. The journey was very dangerous, but he managed to reach the border. However, he lied to the authorities by saying he was going to visit someone, and for this he spent a week in jail, where he felt he had lost any hope. Eventually, he was released and was able to reach the transit camp, and then from there, Mahama. He arrived at the camp without any personal belonging, which made it more difficult to start a new life. Despite the challenges he encountered, he was determined to finish his studies, and thanks to his commitment, he passed the national exam.

Odette and **Beatrice**, both 25 years old, are the last to share their stories. They both suffer from stomach pain, and life in the camp has not made this easier. Beatrice was clearly in pain and therefore wasn’t able to tell much of her story. Odette spoke in her place and explained that Beatrice had to leave Burundi because she was targeted by the militia. Beatrice fled alone, and since her arrival in the camp she has encountered many problems. Odette, instead, told us how militia went looking for her because she was considered ‘physically strong’ and because of this, they tried to convince her to join them. Refusing to do this meant only one thing, she had to leave. When she decided to flee, Odette, like everyone else, faced problems at the border, so she had to lie and say she was going to Rwanda to visit her brother. *‘When I arrived in the camp, I felt how difficult it is to be a refugee. I am alone, single, and I have no support. I live with a family in a block but they don’t want me there. I am not allowed to eat all food since I suffer from stomach-ache. Every time someone makes me sad, my stomach suffers.’*

Life after displacement: the gap between dreams and reality in the camp

The journey from Burundi to Rwanda has left unforgettable trauma for all of them. The physical journey was extremely challenging, as they had to run to escape from the militia, and survive several days with no food or a change of clothes, yet emotionally, it was even harder. Many of them didn’t have a choice but to separate from their families, who remained home or fled towards other neighbouring countries. While some of them are still in touch with their families, others were not able to contact them, and live in the anguish of not knowing what happened to them.

All of them have been living in Mahama for two years now, and life hasn’t gotten any easier during this time. While the presence of many humanitarian actors ensure that their main needs are satisfied, as young men and women, they need much more. They need financial independence, the autonomy to make decisions and plan a future for themselves, which starts by completing their studies and finding a stable source of income.



Garden outside of a brick-made shelter.

Credit: Martina Gastaldello

During our conversation, it was clear that for the majority of them, completing their studies, and in particular achieving a University Diploma was the most important thing. The camp offers primary and secondary school, but they all finished this, and what they dream of is getting a Degree. Jean-Paul is still upset when he remembers that he had to leave the University because remaining in his country was not safe anymore. 'I still dream to obtain a University degree so I can set up my own business.'

The truth is that this is very hard to achieve, as they are stuck in the camp, unable to step forward, and with no perspectives for the near future. While some of them volunteer at the camp library or earn a small amount of money by being incentive volunteers for some NGOs, the prevalent feeling is that they are not doing anything meaningful and are not acquiring useful and technical skills for their future. Being with them in the camp, it was easy to see what their routine is like; every day like the one before, spent trying to survive and wondering how the future is going to change.

As Jean-Bosco summed it up: 'When you live in the camp, you miss everything.' Salvator agreed, and said: 'We are here and don't do anything. We don't see a future, we need money to start a business and build a life for ourselves. When you are young and you have functioning arms and legs, you wish you could be doing something, but instead you are stuck and don't see a future.' Ange-Georgina echoes him: 'We are young and preparing for the future. We have dreams and projects, but how do we achieve them without help? My dream is to empower young girls, but I need support to make this possible.'

Despite this, they are still able to see the positive side: they are alive, and they love and support each other. Together, and with the support of the camp authorities, last year they set up Mahama English Club. Coming from a French-speaking country, they wanted to improve their English and at the same time to teach it to others. For one year and a half, they have been teaching to 600 of their peers. They have been working hard and achieved good results, and are motivated to do more.

My departure from Rwanda: staying in touch

After a visit of the camp, during which they showed me, among others, the blocks, the library, the health centre, the market, and introduced me to other friends, I invited all of them for lunch in the only restaurant just outside the camp. I wanted to give them one moment of normalcy, a nice and full meal, and as soon as I offered that, I saw how much I made them happy. We sat all together in two tables, drinking soda and eating rice, vegetables, meat, pasta and a dessert. I shared many things about my life, and while I was talking about far-away places, my studies, my family, I realized how far away all of that must have sound for them.

They were truly happy in that moment, and they kept thanking me for everything I had done for them. And yet, I felt I did nothing but listening, and I was the one who felt enriched.

It was almost 3 p.m., and for me it was time to go back to Kigali. The sky had turned gloomy, and the clouds on the horizon anticipated heavy rain. Nevertheless, I had to go. We walked together as they accompanied me to take a motorbike close by. There, it was time to say goodbye. One by one, they hugged me and whispered words of gratitude and promised me their eternal friendship. I told them I would not forget them and we would be in touch. As I got on the motorcycle, I knew I could not let them down. I waved and smiled to them until I could no longer see them; then, I spent the rest of the drive replaying the day in Mahama, caught in a swirl of emotions.

My day spent in the camp with them taught me a lot. I saw the admirable work the Rwandan government and its humanitarian partners are doing in the camp, but I also saw nine amazing young men and women suffering, because of a difficult past and an equally difficult present. Fleeing their country and being separated from their loved ones was already hard enough, but what came after wasn't easy either. They deserve to be safe, happy, and most of all, to have the means to build a future for themselves, and this is why I knew I had to help them. As they said: 'We have two arms and two legs, we have a brain, and most of all, we are able to do things.'

Endnotes

¹ Sommers, M, Stuck, Rwandan Youth and the struggle for adulthood, The University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, 2012.

² Sommers, M, Stuck, Rwandan Youth and the struggle for adulthood, The University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, 2012.

³ UNDP Human Development Index, 2017.

⁴ The Constitution of Burundi stipulates that a President can serve for a maximum of two terms, but the President's view was that he was eligible one more time since the first time he was elected by lawmakers and not by the population.

⁵ The guardian, Hundreds protest in Burundi over president's third term, 26 April 2016

⁶ Human Rights Watch, Burundi.

⁷ Humanitarian Response Info, Plan de réponse humanitaire pour le Burundi, p.6.

⁸ UNHCR Operational Portal, Refugee Situation, Burundi, 24 April 2017.

⁹ UNHCR, 'Registration Statistics', updated to June 2017.



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