

The Banyamulenge Tutsi

Survivors of the Gatumba Refugee Camp Massacre

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

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



In February 2007, the United States, through the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration at the U.S. Department of State, will begin resettling about 600 Banyamulenge Tutsi from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The refugees are survivors of a brutal attack in 2004 by Hutu extremists on unarmed Banyamulenge residents of the Gatumba Refugee Camp in Burundi, near the Congolese border. The massacre was the latest episode in a 10-year history of violent persecution against the Banyamulenge Tutsi in the Congo.

The Gatumba survivors will be joining a small community of Banyamulenge Tutsi refugees who first began arriving in the United States in 2000. To help U.S. resettlement agency staff better understand and thus better assist the refugee newcomers, this backgrounder provides basic information about the Banyamulenge Tutsi in general and the Gatumba massacre survivors in particular.

Who Are the Banyamulenge?

Before their displacement, the Banyamulenge Tutsi were pastoralists living in the High Plateaux region of South Kivu province, in the eastern Congo. They are devout Christians and speak Kinyamulenge, a language closely related to Kinyarwanda and Kirundi, the national languages of Rwanda and Burundi respectively.

Before the Congo gained independence in 1960, relations between the Banyamulenge and their neighbors were usually peaceful, but occasionally fraught with tension over land use. In the mid-1960s, during the Simba rebellion that broke out in southeastern Congo, the Banyamulenge encountered war and forced displacement for the first time, and many families were forced to flee their homes and villages for towns, such as Uvira. There, for the first time, many were exposed to the amenities of modern life and acquired a thirst for education that persists to this day. They were not able to return home until about 1968.

In 1994, the Rwandan genocide—in which Hutu extremists murdered nearly 1 million Tutsi in a government-organized campaign of violence—spilled over into the Congo when Hutu perpetrators of the genocide fled across the border, and incited local Congolese to attack Tutsi. Since then there have been regular massacres against Tutsi in the Congo.

In 1996, the Banyamulenge Tutsi rebelled against the central government, which supported their opponents. This became the catalyst for the regional war that ousted Congolese President Mobutu Sese Seko from power in May 1997 and installed Laurent Kabila as president.

In August 1998, a new rebellion, involving Banyamulenge, broke out in the East. Banyamulenge and other Tutsi who were stranded in Kinshasa,

Lubumbashi, and other Congolese cities were attacked, killed, and later imprisoned (in some cases for their own safety). From 1999 to 2000, the United States accepted for resettlement some of these imprisoned families, who had been referred to U.S. refugee officials by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). These individuals became the core of the current Banyamulenge community in America.

After the peace agreement in 2003 between the various rebel movements and the Congolese government, Congolese Tutsi hoped that they would no longer be discriminated against and subject to violence. By 2004, these hopes had evaporated as elements in the government conspired with extremist politicians from eastern Congo to increase hostility towards Tutsi in the East. After a military confrontation in Bukavu in May and June 2004 between rival elements in the unified national army—one strongly Tutsi, the other not—large numbers of Banyamulenge and Tutsi civilians were forced to flee Uvira, Bukavu, and surrounding areas for safety in Burundi and Rwanda.

The families who fled Uvira in June 2004 were temporarily settled by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in a small transit camp in Gatumba in Burundi, within walking distance of the Congolese border. Of the camp's 760 residents, most were Banyamulenge.

On August 13, 2004, a force of armed combatants from the Congo entered Gatumba camp, and massacred 152 residents and injured 107. Almost all of the victims were Banyamulenge; most were women and children. The attackers were members of *Forces Nationales de Libération* (FNL), a Hutu rebel movement known for its violent attacks on Tutsi. Some armed Congolese groups known as *Mayi-Mayi*, as well as remnants of the Rwandan *interahamwe* militias that are still present in the Congo, may also have participated in the attack.

After the attacks, UNHCR placed the most vulnerable victims in a school near the burnt-down camp, moved the injured to hospitals in nearby Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, and evacuated the most seriously wounded to Nairobi, Kenya.

While some survivors were settled by UNHCR in other refugee camps in Burundi, including Mwaro and Gasorwe, other refugees were understandably fearful of going to another refugee camp, and chose instead to provide for themselves in Bujumbura. Some families split up, with different members going to different places.

The Need for Resettlement in the United States

The resettlement of the Gatumba massacre survivors is, in essence, a humanitarian rescue mission of a group of people for whom there are no other good options.

There are three internationally accepted solutions to a refugee situation. The first and best solution is for the refugees to return to their own homes, safely and voluntarily. The second-best solution is for them to integrate into the communities where they have fled; these are often places that are familiar to the refugees in terms of landscape, language, and lifestyle. The third solution is for the refugees to resettle in a third country, such as the United States.

For the Gatumba massacre survivors, the first two options are not possible. They cannot return to their homes because of the ongoing violence against them in the Congo—those who have tried to return have been attacked—and they fear for their lives in Burundi. The only durable solution is to resettle them in a third country, such as the United States.

Cultural Attributes of the Banyamulenge

The Banyamulenge will bring with them to the United States their own beliefs, customs, and way of life. What are these beliefs, practices, and past experiences? Are there any traditional practices that may be considered unusual or even illegal in the United States? Here we examine these and other questions.

Everyday Life

Before they became refugees, the Banyamulenge led a rural existence centered on cattle keeping on the High Plateaux, a rural area of the South Kivu that until the last three years lacked electricity, telephones, or cars. Since they tended to live in permanent villages, they also grew crops. By comparison with their neighbors, they were perceived as wealthier because of the value of their cattle, but by every other measure, they were poor—particularly as cattle stocks have been decimated by war and forced migration since 1995. Today Banyamulenge continue to live on the High Plateaux, but their security is precarious.

Beginning in the 1960s, some Banyamulenge settled in towns in eastern Congo, particularly Uvira and Bukavu, where they were exposed to modern amenities and other languages and customs. In the 1970s, some Banyamulenge families settled in Kinshasa, the capital of the Congo, and in Lubumbashi, the country's second largest city, and some Banyamulenge students could be found studying at universities around the country.

Religion

The Banyamulenge are a very religious people. Perhaps 80% are evangelical or Pentecostal Protestants, while about 20% are Catholic. The role of religion is so central to the life of the community that people often say, “Religion has become our culture.” Young people tend to be as devout as their elders, if not more so. A key feature of their religious practice is lengthy sessions of intense prayer, sometimes accompanied by music, and, more rarely, by dancing.

The Banyamulenge became Christian late compared to other peoples in Africa. It was not until the early 1950s that the majority of the community converted en masse. They were not converted by Western missionaries, who never established themselves on the High Plateaux where the Banyamulenge lived, but rather became Christian through exposure to the religion from Congolese neighbors who had adopted Swedish Pentecostalism in the 1920s and 1930s.

In the early days, converts were expected to prove their conversion by eating taboo foods such as chicken and by abstaining from tobacco, dancing, traditional poetry, extra-marital affairs—even from sharing meals with Catholic or non-Christian Banyamulenge. These strictures have become less severe over time, but the Banyamulenge remain a people who take moral conduct very seriously.

Family Relationships

The extended family is considered close and includes aunts and uncles and their children, as well as great-aunts and great-uncles and their children and grandchildren. Paternal cousins will often refer to each other as “brother” or “sister” and treat each other accordingly. Paternal cousins may not marry one another, but maternal ones may.

Among the Banyamulenge, the entire extended family plays a role in raising children. For example, children may be sent to live with distant relatives in order to go to school, sometimes for years on end. Given the large number of orphans generated by the wars, there are many Banyamulenge children being raised by aunts and uncles, and sometimes even more distant relatives.

There are also wider conceptions of family based on clan or subclan that have moral claims on an individual, though not all clans or subclans have the same level of internal solidarity.

Role of Women

Banyamulenge women tend to remain in the background, both inside families and in community politics. Notable exceptions are Mariamu Kinyamarura, a widely celebrated prophetess who died while trying to flee to Rwanda in 1996;

Angélique Kega Nyakayange, an important military commander; and Neema Namadamu, a handicapped woman who worked as assistant to the Minister for Women’s Affairs in Kinshasa.

In addition to cooking and looking after children, Banyamulenge women will sometimes conduct their own business or trading activities to supplement the family’s income, notably in marketing agricultural produce or fabric for traditional women’s clothes. Contraception or family planning is not popular, and women often bear five or more children. Families can be very large, by U.S. standards, a fact that poses serious economic challenges for new arrivals in the United States. There are many Banyamulenge widows because of the wars, and their situation is often very precarious. When their children get older, they are often claimed by the deceased husband’s family and raised by his brothers. A widow usually finds it nearly impossible to remarry.

Marriage Practices

In the recent past, it was not uncommon for first or second cousins to marry, nor was it uncommon for girls to marry and begin bearing children at age 14 or 15. With increased contact with the outside world, this is becoming less frequent. Marriages used to be arranged, and while the extended family is still heavily involved in marriage decisions, individuals are nowadays more or less free to choose their own partners. However, a Banyamulenge man who does not marry by age 35 or 40 is thought to be highly eccentric, and will get a lot of grief from his family.

Food and Dietary Restrictions

The preferred meat is beef and sometimes liver, together with a starchy staple, such as a thick polenta made of corn, as well as bananas, sorghum, sweet potatoes, rice, and beans. Milk is especially prized, as is slightly fermented milk. Banyamulenge in the United States often drink buttermilk straight from the carton.

In the past, Banyamulenge did not eat fish or chicken, though nowadays most people do, particularly those who have lived away from the High Plateaux—as most of the Gatumba survivors have. Christian converts would eat these foods to prove that they had broken with “pagan” ways, but some old people are still uncomfortable eating them.

Forms of Leadership

There are three types of leaders in contemporary Banyamulenge society. The most important are the religious leaders. The second and third groups are political and military leaders. Both of these emerged during the turmoil of the past

10 years. These leaders, who are mostly young (often in their early 30s) and sometimes from less prestigious families, represent a challenge to religious leadership. Many political leaders do not enjoy high respect within the community, because some of them are seen as having served their own interests rather than the greater good of the community.

There are no longer traditional elders with much authority, though many of the more influential pastors tend to be in their 40s, 50s, and 60s (a man in his 50s is considered already old).

Traditional Customs that May Conflict with U.S. Practices

Other than the cultural practice of early marriage—which, as already noted, is in decline—there are no Banyamulenge practices that would be considered highly unusual or illegal in the United States. The Banyamulenge do not practice polygamy. Domestic violence and divorce are rare. Animal sacrifice is unheard of, nor are Banyamulenge particularly fond of traditional medicine or “sorcery”—though they believe it exists and fear it. The Banyamulenge have never practiced female circumcision.

The Gatumba Survivors: Resettlement Considerations

The previous section examined Banyamulenge culture and way of life in general. This section looks at key background characteristics of the specific Banyamulenge population currently being resettled in the United States, and considers some of their resettlement needs in light of these characteristics. Much of the content is based on information informally collected by Cultural Orientation (CO) staff during two CO training sessions that 118 Gatumba survivors underwent in Kenya in preparation for their resettlement in the United States.

Health

By one estimate, 90% of the two groups that underwent CO training lost a family member or close friend as a result of the massacre. Some individuals reported having watched spouses and children die right before them on the night of August 13, 2004. To CO instructors, it was evident that many individuals were suffering from both physical and mental injuries. A number had received bullet wounds that severely impaired their ability to move their arms, hands, and legs. Some could not write due to injuries; others still complained of significant pain. A few women were partially blinded by bullets. However, there were only a few cases among the 118 trainees who were so disabled as to require a crutch or the help of another person to get about.

Refugees appeared to staff to be a fragile, and, in many ways, broken group who needed care and especially needed the chance to talk about what one group leader eloquently described as the “unimaginable pain” they had experienced at Gatumba. Resettlement staff should not expect refugees to open up quickly, however. To outsiders, Banyamulenge, particularly women, can at first seem unemotional and difficult to reach: They are taught from birth that respectable people are stoic and don’t reveal emotions to strangers. Once trust is built, however, they will freely share their experiences and feelings.

For individuals with medical conditions, the medical information has been reported on individual medical forms.

Exposure to Modern Amenities

Many members of the Gatumba group had been living in the town of Uvira before becoming refugees in Burundi. Moreover, roughly half of the refugees being resettled in the United States in 2007 will have lived in Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, after the 2004 massacre. Banyamulenge who spent time in either of these places will be more savvy about modern amenities than those who lived their entire lives on the High Plateaux. But even Banyamulenge from rural areas can be expected to adapt quickly and eagerly to modern conveniences.

Very few adults will know how to drive before coming to the United States. Some younger people will have experience using computers, particularly e-mail, which they use to stay in touch with friends and relatives. Few will have ever opened a bank account.

Work Experiences

Few refugees in the two CO classes had held salaried jobs. Most had worked either in Uvira, or in their villages in eastern Congo, for a daily wage, and earned money from small trade, while before they had relied on farming and cattle keeping. In one CO class, when asked what jobs they had held, refugees gave the following answers: sweeper, cow-hand, farmer, cooking oil vendor, church pastor, and barber. These are all jobs that require little if any training.

CO staff report that the refugees appeared enthusiastic to work and willing to take any entry-level job. Persistent unemployment has not been a problem for Banyamulenge refugees previously resettled in the United States.

Education and Literacy Levels

With the exception of the very elderly, most refugees undergoing CO training had at least a primary-level education. All could communicate in Swahili, although Kinyamulenge was the language they generally used to communicate among themselves. Most were literate and could read and write in

Kinyamulenge and some could read and write French. English was very limited, although some had picked up a little while living in Burundi.

Children who have grown up in Uvira do not always speak Kinyamulenge very well; their primary language is sometimes Swahili, and if they went to school they will know some French.

Average Family Size and Composition

As a result of the massacre, the average family size among refugees in CO classes was smaller than traditionally is the case: The typical family had between four and six members, although some families included as many as seven children. Smaller than usual family size was also a function of the fact that many families had children over 18 who were split off into their own separate cases.

Family Ties to the United States

Among the first two groups of refugees who underwent CO training, none claimed to have family in the United States, although it is likely that some in fact do have family or at least friends among Banyamulenge who have already been resettled. Without support from U.S. relatives, refugees survive on rations provided by UNHCR or on charity handouts given by local churches or relatives now living in Rwanda.

Existing Banyamulenge Communities in the United States

There are approximately eight small Banyamulenge communities in the United States. The largest of these are Portland, Maine (by far the largest and most established community, with more than 25 families and a Banyamulenge church); Houston, Texas (about 10 families); Phoenix, Arizona (5-10 families); and Washington, D.C. area (4-5 families). There are also smaller groups of 2 to 3 families in Missouri, New Hampshire, Texas, and Washington State.

The Portland community was founded by Pastor Peter Mutima, who came to the United States in the early 1990s. He originally lived in the Washington D.C. area, but moved to Portland. He founded a church there, and he later assisted many Banyamulenge refugees who came to the area. The communities in Houston and Phoenix were created when groups of families were assigned there as part of the post-1999 resettlement from Kinshasa and Lubumbashi. Some families and individuals who were assigned elsewhere in the United States eventually migrated to one of these three communities to be near friends and relatives.

Banyamulenge currently in the United States have tended to work in small factories, in food service and hospitality, and

as taxi drivers and security guards. There are also several Banyamulenge who have completed college in the United States and who now hold professional positions in, for example, financial or medical services.

Caseworker Languages

Kinyarwanda/Kirundi speakers would of course be best able to communicate with the refugees. However, Swahili speakers would also work well, since all refugees will be proficient in that language. For the most part, caseworkers belonging to other ethnic groups should present no special problem; Burundians, Kenyans, Rwandans, and other Swahili speakers would be fine. Congolese, however, should be carefully considered since many are prejudiced against the Banyamulenge or Congolese Tutsi in general. They may believe that the Banyamulenge are not Congolese at all, or hold them responsible for the war and suffering in the Congo. Obviously Congolese who hold these beliefs would not be suitable caseworkers for Banyamulenge refugees.

Other Considerations

In working with this population, agency staff should keep in mind that the refugees strongly relate to their identity as survivors of the Gatumba massacre. They have learned to survive and cope together, often living in large family groups under one roof. Famous for sticking together and helping each other out without reservation, the Banyamulenge heal within the family, community, and church.

The content in this backgrounder is based on four sources:

- a 2004 report, *Rescue Resettlement Proposal: Banyamulenge Tutsi Survivors of Gatumba Camp*, by Sasha Chanoff, executive director of Mapendo International;
- *Banyamulenge Cultural Attributes*, a document prepared for the Cultural Orientation Resource Center (COR Center) at the Center for Applied Linguistics, by Mauro De Lorenzo, resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and Pindie Stephen, regional cultural orientation coordinator, IOM, Nairobi, Kenya;
- information from refugee processing staff, including Cultural Orientation staff, in Kenya; and
- statistics provided by Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS).

Editor: Donald A. Ranard

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At a Glance:

Total Cases: 168

Total Individuals: 647

Average Case Size: 3

Small size is due to the Gatumba massacre and the policy of splitting refugees over 18 into separate cases.

Country of Origin:

The Democratic Republic of the Congo

Refugee Camps Experience:

All lived in Gatumba Refugee Camp, Burundi. Following the massacre, most refugees lived in Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, and some were placed by the UNHCR in other refugee camps in Burundi, including Mwaro and Gasorwe.

Native Language:

Kinyamulenge

Other Languages:

All are proficient in Swahili, and some know French; knowledge of English is very limited

Literacy:

Most have at least basic literacy in Swahili. Some can read and write French.

Health:

As survivors of severe trauma, many can be expected to have special physical and mental health needs.

Exposure to Modern Amenities:

Many have been exposed to modern amenities in cities in the Congo and in Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi.

Work Experience:

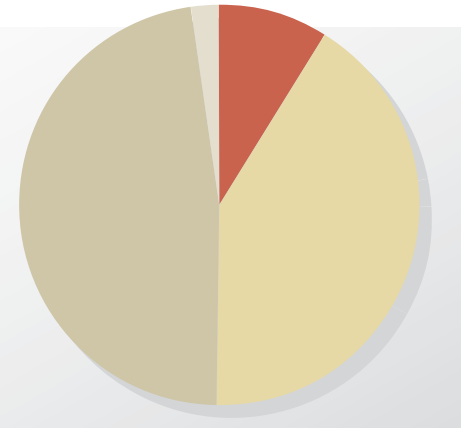
Traditionally worked as farmers and cattle breeders; in recent years, most have worked in towns as small traders, vendors, or in unskilled or semiskilled jobs.

The Banyamulenge Tutsi

Gender: Male 50% Female 50%

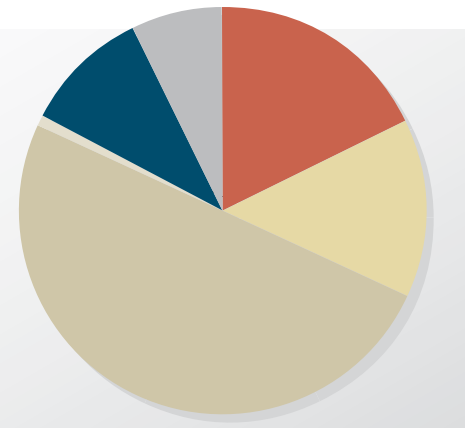
Ages:

Up to 4	9%	●
5-17	41%	●
18-59	47%	●
60+	2%	●



Education Ages 18 and Above

None	18%	●
Primary	14%	●
Secondary	50%	●
Technical School	1%	●
University	10%	●
Bio-data unknown or incomplete	7%	●



Education Ages 5-17

None	6%	●
Kindergarten	6%	●
Primary	64%	●
Secondary	22%	●
College	0.4%	●
Bio-data unknown or incomplete	4%	●

