



BURUNDI: Human rights defenders action

Background information on the *Association Burundaise pour la Défense des droits des Prisonniers (ABDP)* and the *Ligue ITEKA*



ITEKA

The *Ligue* ITEKA, Burundian Human Rights League, was formed in 1990 and was the first independent organization for the protection of human rights to have been officially recognized and to have been allowed to operate openly in Burundi. Since its foundation, ITEKA has become one of Burundi's most established and active human rights organizations, with a current membership of around 1,000.

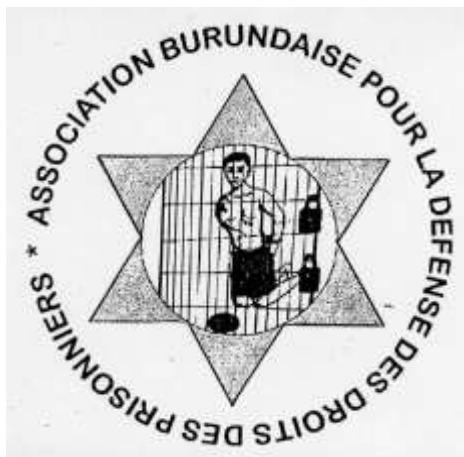
ITEKA conducts monitoring on the full range of human rights concerns in Burundi and maintains a staff of human rights observers based around the country, who document individual cases of killings and extrajudicial executions, torture and other abuses. The organization also directly assists or advises an average of 500 persons each year in cases of "disappearance", arbitrary detentions and legal proceedings. As part of its program of assistance to detainees, ITEKA has agreements with more than 20 lawyers to represent cases of individuals before the Burundian criminal courts and other jurisdictions, including the military courts, and has a program to transport witnesses to court hearings: a practical and vital task which helps to reduce delays in court hearings and which ensures that the rights of both victims and defendants are respected by the courts.

Lobbying, too, is also an increasingly important element of ITEKA's work. The organization chairs the *Observatoire de l'action gouvernementale*, Observatory on Governmental Action, created in 1999, a platform for members of parliament, representatives of civil society and of the media. ITEKA has been particularly active in drawing public, governmental and international attention, through press releases and public statements to the various human rights issues surrounding Burundi's ongoing peace process.

ITEKA also devotes considerable resources and time to human rights promotional work and laying a firmer foundation for respect of human rights in Burundi. The organization produces monthly information bulletins in both French and Kirundi (with a combined circulation of around 3,000) on human rights issues and developments, broadcasts a weekly human rights radio program from Bujumbura, and runs human rights "clubs" in around 30 secondary schools across the country. These clubs civic education, reconciliation and conflict resolution. ITEKA has also produced and distributed 5,000 copies of a Human Rights Education Manual, and translates into Kirundi core human rights texts such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

ITEKA is an active participant in regional and international human rights associations, as a member of the *Ligue des Droits de la Personne de la région des Grands Lacs* (LDGL), Great Lakes Regional League for the Rights of the Individual, an umbrella organization created in 1993 for civil society associations from Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and as an affiliate member of the *Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme* (FIDH), International Federation of Human Rights Leagues and of the *Union Interafricaine des Droits de l'Homme* (UIDH), Inter-African Union of Human Rights.

ABDP



The *Association Burundaise pour la Défense des Droits des Prisonniers* (ABDP), Burundian Association for the Defence of Prisoners' Rights, was founded in November 1995 but within weeks an intensification in Burundi's conflict forced most of its founding members into exile or internal displacement. Only in early 1997 was the ABDP able to

reconstitute itself and fully begin its work

The ABDP's core objectives are to defend and advance the human and legal rights of Burundi's detainees and prisoners, as well as to promote their physical and social well-being. Many of the founding members of the ABDP are themselves former detainees, and the ABDP's work was largely inspired by their experiences and the appalling conditions they encountered inside Burundi's prison and detention centres. As a result, the ABDP's initiatives have been firmly rooted in practical measures to improve the lot of prisoners and detainees. The ABDP conducts regular visits to detention centres and to central prisons, holding meetings with the authorities and with detainees. Over the last year in particular, conditions in Burundi's central prisons have improved significantly, thanks in part to the work of the ABDP. The ABDP has achieved this by concentrating on four main areas of action:

1 Monitoring of detainees' case files

One of the greatest problems encountered by the ABDP when it began its work was that a large number of people were detained without case files setting out the charges and progress of the legal proceedings against them. Other detainees were routinely not informed of the stages their case files had reached, whether at the level of investigations, or at the level of court hearings. The ABDP set

about reuniting detainees with their case files, pushing for those without case files to be released, and persuading the authorities to bring records up to date and to ensure that all detainees were informed of the progress of their cases. The ABDP has also ensured that convicted prisoners are given access to the texts of court judgments against them, and that they are informed of their release dates, which the ABDP monitors to ensure that prisoners are actually released. The ABDP is a vital source of information and hope for prisoners and detainees and their families.

2 Legal assistance to prisoners

Most detainees in Burundi lack the means to defend themselves effectively. Many detainees are also tortured or ill-treated into making confessions or statements incriminating themselves or others. In spite of often compelling evidence that torture has taken place, however, such confessions are routinely accepted by the courts. The ABDP, in cooperation with a number of Burundian lawyers, has established a legal assistance program to represent the rights of such detainees before the courts.

3 Medical and food aid to prisoners

The ABDP has in place a medical assistance program supplying essential basic medicines to prisoners and food supplements to combat deficiencies in the prison diet which leaves many prisoners vulnerable to illness or disease. The association is active in trying to persuade the Burundian authorities and the international donor community to improve medical facilities and the provision of foodstuffs in prisons and detention centres.

4 Training and support to juveniles in prison

The majority of juveniles in prison have no access to training. The ABDP has been active in arranging vocational training courses for these young people in topics such as agriculture, mechanics and carpentry. This program benefits the mental and physical health of young people while in prison, and also greatly improves their chances of a successful reintegration into the community after their release.

The ABDP's work against torture

Faced with the enormous problem of torture in the early stages of detention in Burundi, the struggle against torture has also become a key part of the ABDP's work and the organization has become increasingly active in campaigning on this issue at a national level. The ABDP documents cases of torture, intervenes regularly to protect people at risk of torture, and has issued public statements condemning instances of this human rights violation. In June 2000 the ABDP organized a "day of reflection" -- a seminar and workshop -- on the issue of torture, with the participation of various government and civil society representatives, which concluded with the formulation of a number of recommendations, addressed to the government, the National Assembly and civil society as a whole, to bring an end to torture in Burundi.