

The Humanitarian Impacts of Economic Sanctions on Burundi Preliminary Findings

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In the context of a global United Nations-commissioned study examining the humanitarian impacts of economic sanctions, the authors were asked to review sanctions imposed against Burundi as the most recent and evolving example of sanctions as a policy tool. During their month-long field study in Burundi and Kenya, Drs. Hoskins and Nutt interviewed personnel from more than fifty United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Burundian government offices and foreign embassies. The following comments are preliminary in nature, pending completion and publication of the full report in the coming months. The views expressed represent those of the consultants and are not necessarily those of the organizations involved in the larger research study.

Important characteristics of the Burundi sanctions

-Comprehensive sanctions (with no humanitarian exemptions) were first imposed on July 31, 1996. They have been gradually modified to permit limited humanitarian exemptions on a case-by-case approval basis.

-These are regional sanctions, recognized and endorsed, but not enforced by the international community. Sanctioning countries include Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Zaire and Zambia. A Regional Sanctions Coordinating Committee (RSCC), composed of representatives of the participating countries, formulates sanctions policy, reviews implementation of the sanctions and considers requests for general exemptions. Following RSCC exemption, specific requests and quantities of humanitarian aid must be submitted for approval, on a written case-by-case basis, to National Sanctions Committees (NSC) established within each sanctioning country.

-A combination of profiteering, insecurity, lack of enforcement, and weakening political resolve has resulted in a high level of smuggling and cross-border trade which have diluted sanction's impact.

-Burundi's rural subsistence economy, limiting household interaction with the formal economy, may partially shield rural families from sanctions' negative humanitarian effects.

Methodological constraints of Burundi study

-Since 1993, Burundi's internal crisis and civil war have had far-reaching and devastating human consequences. It is therefore exceptionally difficult to ascertain whether the observed humanitarian condition is the result of sanctions, the ongoing crisis, or a combination of factors.

-Even allowing for serious methodological, logistical and security constraints, the absence of reliable data regarding the condition of Burundi's civilian population is problematic. The ability to draw conclusions concerning the humanitarian impact of sanctions hinges on the presence of adequate and reliable baseline and ongoing data describing civilian health and well-being.

The impact of sanctions on humanitarian activities

-The comprehensive nature of the Burundi sanctions has created serious operational difficulties for all humanitarian agencies. Initially, only human medicines and food aid for Rwandan refugees were exempt. The near-total lack of exemptions during the first months of the embargo placed many UN and NGO programmes at risk. Humanitarian relief flights were not permitted until September 6. Fuel for use by UN agencies and NGOs was prohibited until September 6, with the first allocation arriving only in November, resulting in severe in-country shortages affecting programme operations. Seeds and fertilizers were permitted only after September 21. Approval for foodstuffs was not granted until October 21, and even then it was only for displaced populations, and within specific quotas. Allowable quotas for foodstuffs were not determined by the RSCC until November 30. Other basic items including water purifying agents, blankets, jerry cans and cooking materials were exempt only after October 21. Eventually, as the mechanism for case-by-case approval of exempted items became better understood by all parties, some improvement in the flow of relief materials did occur.

-RSCC approval of partial exemptions has therefore resulted in somewhat improved operational conditions for the humanitarian agencies. Yet many operational difficulties remain. Problems attributable to sanctions include higher fuel costs, higher (programme) operational costs, reduced operational capacity of agencies, procurement delays, delays in clearance and transportation of relief supplies, relief shipments blocked in neighbouring (sanctioning) countries, quotas imposed on humanitarian imports, refusal of some UN/NGO requests for exemptions (e.g. educational materials), confusion regarding sanctions

procedures, conflicting and changing requirements for clearance, restrictions on importing office supplies and personal effects, higher costs of air transport, and restrictions regarding air/land corridors. These difficulties have combined to significantly reduce the scope of programme activities.

-At present, requests for educational (school) materials, hand tools, spare parts and lubricants for vehicles, office supplies, a standing exemption for emergency medical evacuation, and a request to permit diplomatic air freight remain pending in front of the RSCC.

-Exemptions are granted only to the United Nations and NGOs, and only for activities directed toward refugee and displaced populations. The Burundi regime is unable (legally) to import any items. For this reason, the burden of supplying such items as agricultural inputs, medicines and shelter materials, falls on the humanitarian agencies. Furthermore, the sanctions regime requires that distribution of such exempt items must be carried out by either the United Nations or NGOs. These requirements have greatly increased the workload of the humanitarian agencies. In addition, reduced government revenue has made it more difficult for the regime to administer and maintain social programmes, increasing the burden on NGOs and the United Nations to take up the slack.

-A shortage of fuel (diesel and petrol) for agency operations forced essentially all humanitarian organizations to purchase fuel on the parallel market at greatly-inflated prices. This action, although not specifically a sanctions violation, has directly benefitted those parties profiteering from cross-border smuggling. On September 6, a single month's allocation of fuel was granted by the RSCC. From early December until RSCC's Lusaka meeting in mid-February, no reply was received to repeated United Nations requests for fuel. Only a partial allocation (approximately two weeks supply) was approved on January 27 and is expected to arrive in mid-March. A monthly quota for fuel was ultimately approved following the February Lusaka meeting.

-At present, most UN agencies and NGOs regard sanctions as a serious 'inconvenience', complicating - but no longer jeopardizing - their ongoing activities. Most complaints centre around the additional bureaucracy, paperwork and time required by sanctions procedures. Most agencies appear to have adapted themselves to the difficult conditions brought about by sanctions. While humanitarian activities have clearly been hindered, no specific examples were given to suggest that sanctions had led to actual suspension of programmes. Supervision has suffered due to shortages of fuel. Sanctions may have prevented expansion of humanitarian activities to take into account increased domestic humanitarian needs.

The impact of sanctions on the civilian population

The impacts of sanctions on the local population have been both serious and substantial, quite apart from their effects on humanitarian programmes. Humanitarian activities per se only reach a small proportion of the Burundian population. The greatest civilian impact of sanctions is likely mediated not through the hindrance of humanitarian activities, but rather through damage to the local economy, agriculture and social services.

-The precise impact of sanctions on the civilian population is difficult to measure due to the lack of reliable data. There is considerable overlap with the damaging effects and suffering caused by the ongoing internal crisis.

-Since there are no exemptions provided to the private sector or the Burundian regime, smuggling and humanitarian assistance have become the only two sources of imported essential goods. Smuggled items are available at high cost to the consumer, while humanitarian assistance is available only to targeted vulnerable (generally displaced) populations.

-Sanctions have therefore created shortages of fuel, raw materials, retail goods, spare parts, agricultural inputs and medicines, among other items. Those items still available (through smuggling) are available at high cost to the consumer. The result has been hyper-inflation, paralysis of the commercial and industrial sectors of the economy, loss of income, and rising unemployment. Factories in Bujumbura have closed, suspending production and laying-off workers. Bujumbura port has closed. Production of essential drugs by the National Pharmaceutical Office (a government-run enterprise) has been greatly reduced due to the regime's inability (under sanctions) to import the necessary raw materials for manufacturing medicines.

Sanctions have affected Burundi's different civilian populations in distinct ways.

- Urban population (Bujumbura). This group, representing approximately five percent of the country's population, has been profoundly impacted by prolonged sanctions. In addition to the families of merchants, factory workers, port labourers and government bureaucrats, this group includes the urban poor, as well as many displaced and repatriated families. Heavily dependent on the formal economy for employment (retail, trade, industry and unskilled labour), the urban population has been affected by high unemployment, reduced family incomes, and escalating costs of foodstuffs and other essential items.

- Rural population. This population consists almost entirely of subsistence farmers, whose interaction with the formal economy is much more limited. These families generally consume what they produce. They depend on the formal economy for agricultural inputs, basic amenities (e.g. sugar, salt, soap, clothing), as well as for the sale of surplus produce. Their higher degree of self-sufficiency has therefore provided them with a greater degree of protection as compared to their urban counterparts, perhaps slightly delaying sanctions' negative humanitarian effects. Nonetheless, rural families have still been affected by a shortage of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides and farming implements, as well as a reduction in social services (e.g. health care and education) due to the regime's increasing inability to finance these services. Anticipated below-normal yields of cereals, pulses, bananas, coffee and other crops will cause further hardship in rural families, aggravated by the continuing economic sanctions.

- Displaced, repatriated, refugee and regrouped populations. This population, estimated at more than five hundred thousand persons, is highly dependent on international humanitarian assistance. Sanctions' effects on humanitarian activities, outlined above, therefore impact very profoundly on this population. These civilians also happen to be the most vulnerable, often destitute, and therefore seriously affected by any reduction in humanitarian activities.

- Agricultural impact. As mentioned earlier, the regime is no longer legally permitted to import agricultural inputs. Therefore, the responsibility for importing seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, farm implements and other inputs now lies with the humanitarian agencies. Seeds and fertilizers were not exempt from sanctions until September 21, too late for the fall planting season. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported that there were virtually no fertilizers in the country at the time of planting. The 1997 first season crop is expected to be significantly below normal yields. A combination of lower domestic production, economic sanctions and higher transportation costs are expected to keep food prices high and supplies tight in the coming months.

-Impact on health, education and other social services. A decline in revenue resulting from the embargo has reduced the regime's capacity to administer and maintain social programmes. Higher fuel costs have limited supervision and the delivery of supplies. Vaccination coverage has plummeted due to a shortage of fuel for transport and kerosene for vaccine refrigerators. Medicines are no longer imported by the regime. Smuggled drugs are available only at highly inflated prices. Domestic manufacture of medicines has been largely suspended due to a lack of imported raw materials. Foods for supplementary feeding programmes are in short supply. Laboratory and medical supplies are also scarce. Despite their exemption, spare parts and other inputs (e.g. chlorine) for water purification and sanitation services are in short supply since they can now only be imported by UN agencies and NGOs, on a case-by-case approval basis. These and other sanctions-related problems aggravate an already fragile health care system, badly damaged from four years of violence and insecurity. Health surveillance has also suffered due to the ongoing crisis and the sanctions, and very little data exists regarding disease patterns or malnutrition rates. In education, no exemptions have yet been granted for such items as chalk, pencils, paper or children's slates. Enrollment, already low due to the

crisis, continues to decline as parents are unable to pay for education costs, teachers are unavailable or unpaid, and children are needed to work at home.

The impacts of sanctions on the Burundi authorities

-Although sanctions initially resulted in severe shortages of fuel and other basic commodities as importation and production ceased, the commercial sector and Burundian regime have since taken steps to adapt to the new economic reality. Many imported items remain available in Bujumbura markets (although at inflated prices), and fuel is available at prices two-to-three times pre-sanctions levels.

-It is unlikely that the regime will be capable of maintaining its social programmes, including health and education.

-Sanctions-breaking air corridors have been established between Bujumbura and other African and European countries (only UN flights are authorized to fly into Burundi). Fuel and other basic supplies are imported, while mainly coffee is exported. A high-rate of smuggling exists across borders with neighbouring (sanctioning) countries. The border with eastern Zaire is porous, facilitating the unhindered movement of goods. Barges can be seen arriving from across Lake Tanganyika to the port in Bujumbura.

-Sanctions have, in many ways, increased tensions between the Burundi regime and neighbouring countries. The regime in Bujumbura has been somewhat successful in portraying the sanctions as an attack not against the regime itself but against the Burundi people. Two member states of the RSCC are singled out as the aggressors. Sanctions have also provided the Burundi regime with a useful scapegoat. Economic and social difficulties are blamed on the sanctions regime, diverting attention away from the regime's involvement in the internal conflict and concerns regarding its human rights record.

-The extent to which the Burundi regime has met the three conditions imposed at the Arusha Regional Summit of July 31, 1996, is beyond the scope of this preliminary document. Clearly, however, some limited progress has been made. One question is whether this limited progress should be acknowledged in some way, for example by the elimination of quotas or the expansion of land corridors.

-The lack of a precisely defined endpoint to sanctions may complicate eventual lifting or loosening of the embargo. Any perception that sanctioning countries are 'moving the goalposts' by adding or modifying conditions may discourage the Burundi regime from

further compliance. There is currently great ambiguity concerning what action will satisfy the requirement for 'unconditional negotiations'. Will 'negotiations' be sufficient, or does lifting of sanctions hinge upon substantial progress being made in these talks?

Future considerations

-Clearly, sanctions are having a significant impact on the Burundian economy and causing considerable civilian hardship. They are compounding an already difficult situation caused by the internal crisis and insecurity.

-The political impact of sanctions is more difficult to measure. While it is possible that concessions by the regime may, in part, be the result of prolonged sanctions, there is no concrete evidence that sanctions have been successful. Although the willingness of the Burundi regime to undertake unconditional negotiations is an important and positive step, whether it resulted from pressure due to sanctions is unknown. Equally possible is that diplomatic isolation and refusal by the international community to recognize the leadership in Bujumbura is responsible for the regime's concessions. It is therefore important to ask whether the same results might have been achieved with more targeted, civilian-friendly sanctions. Similarly, might there also be incentives which, if offered to the regime in acknowledgement of concessions already made, could help advance the desired political objectives, while improving conditions for the civilian population?

-Sanctions were originally imposed with the implementing countries' expectations that they would achieve their stated policy objectives within 1-2 months, however unrealistic this timeframe might have been. Now, more than seven months following their imposition, it is time to reassess sanctions' political, economic and humanitarian impacts. Sanctions must also be reviewed in light of any progress made in the peace process.

-Neighbouring countries and the international community have an obligation to examine and closely monitor sanctions in light of information regarding their damaging humanitarian impact. If sanctions are found to have a disproportionate negative effect on civilians, it compels sanctioning countries to retarget sanctions in a manner more protective of vulnerable populations.

-Even with current humanitarian exemptions, sanctions remain a serious problem for humanitarian agencies working in Burundi, and may prevent relief efforts from meeting the basic humanitarian needs of the civilian population. Consideration should be given to expanding the list of exempted items and to simplifying the exemption process.

-The suggestion of the RSCC (February 13) to 'carry out a critical assessment of the sanctions' is both timely and appropriate. So is the recent appeal of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) for 'an objective evaluation of the situation prevailing in [Burundi] as the result of implementation of the sanctions and to review these sanctions in the light of progress in the peace process'. It may be that sanctions can be retargeted in such a way so as to more specifically target the regime, while sparing the civilian population.

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