

## New hope for Burundi

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By Guardian Reporter



*President Benjamin Mkapa(second L)and Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation minister Jakaya Kikwete(secondR) witness the first ever handshake between Burundian Interim President Domitien Ndayizeye(L)and rebel leader Agathon Rwassa of FNL at State*

Burundian President Domitien Ndayizeye met in Dar es Salaam yesterday with the leader of the only rebel group still actively involved in the country's civil war.

It was the first time that President Ndayizeye had held formal talks with Forces for National Liberation (FNL) leader Agathon Rwassa.

The meeting is aimed at bringing the rebels into the peace process.

The two first met at State House and shook hands as their host, President Benjamin Mkapa, and other top Tanzanian government officials witnessed the historic occasion.

President Ndayizeye thanked Tanzania for the key role it was playing in efforts to find lasting peace in Burundi and added that he hoped yesterday's meeting would lay the ground for a new beginning for the central African country.

He said he was sure the outcome of the talks would satisfy both sides.

The Burundian interim government had put in place institutions that would enable Burundians to go to the polls later this year as agreed in the Arusha Peace Pact, President Ndayizeye added.

Rwassa thanked President Mkapa for making yesterday's meeting a reality and commended President Ndayizeye for agreeing to meet him.

He said the FNL was not interested in wresting power in Burundi, adding that all they were asking for was equality among all Burundians.

Rwassa warned, however, that his decision to meet President Ndayizeye for peace

talks was not a sign of weakness.

President Ndayizeye and Rwassa then moved to a Dar es Salaam hotel for talks after months of behind-the-scenes work by Tanzania with the FNL.

Recent discussions with the extremist FNL have produced the best hopes in years among diplomats that Burundi can finally settle one of its last major impediments to peace.

The normally reclusive Rwassa gave an unprecedented news conference on April 27, in Dar es Salaam and said his group, still fighting government troops, was ready to negotiate.

Burundi broke off all contact with the FNL after the rebels claimed responsibility for a massacre of more than 160 Congolese Tutsi refugees at Gatumba refugee camp in August.

Since then, regional countries who have shepherded Burundi's peace process have declared the FNL a terrorist organisation, a label they have said they will only lift when the FNL engaged in peace talks.

Burundi, a tiny coffee-producing nation of seven million, is slowly emerging from more than a decade of civil war that pitted the Hutu majority against the politically dominant Tutsi minority and killed some 300,000 people.

It is due to hold local and parliamentary elections in time for the parliament to elect and swear in a president by August 26.

The president is almost certain to be a Hutu under a power-sharing scheme that guarantees a Hutu majority and Tutsi minority representation in the parliament.

\* SOURCE: Guardian