BURUNDI: CDH/VICAR Raises the Alarm over Threats against Banyamulenge Refugees and Urges UNHCR to Secure Their Transfer to Safer Countries

CDH/VICAR raises alarm over threats against Banyamulenge refugees in Burundi and calls on UNHCR to Advocate for Their Transfer to Safer Host Countries.

Since 1996, the Banyamulenge, a Congolese community originating mainly from the highlands of South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), have faced repeated cycles of violence, persecution, and forced displacement. These events have forced many families to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, including Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania. For these populations, fleeing their country has been a means of seeking safety and protection from the violence they experienced in their country of origin.

However, CDH/VICAR expresses deep concern over the increasingly alarming situation of Banyamulenge refugees in Burundi. Since military cooperation between Burundi and the DRC intensified, particularly from 2023 onwards, Burundian forces have participated in operations against armed groups such as M23 and Twirwaneho operating in eastern DRC. Twirwaneho includes fighters from the Banyamulenge community. This situation raises fears that Banyamulenge refugees may increasingly be associated with the armed groups being fought by Burundian forces, despite having fled their country precisely to seek international protection.

CDH/VICAR is particularly concerned about recurring threats and decisions reportedly made by Burundian authorities to relocate Banyamulenge refugees to refugee camps, including those who have lived in urban areas for several years and engage in economic activities. When imposed in a discriminatory manner, such measures risk undermining their freedom of movement, livelihoods, and dignity. They also contribute to an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty within the community.

Reports of repeated arrests of Congolese refugees belonging to the Banyamulenge community, who have been publicly accused of collaborating with armed groups such as M23, Twirwaneho,

and RED-Tabara, as well as alleged espionage activities on behalf of Rwanda, further heighten these concerns. CDH/VICAR recalls that criminal allegations must be established individually before a competent court and that all arrested individuals are entitled to the presumption of innocence. Their public presentation, accompanied by serious accusations before any judicial ruling, raises significant concerns regarding respect for their fundamental rights.

CDH/VICAR is also concerned about statements attributed to the spokesperson of the Burundian ministry responsible for internal security, who reportedly called for increased surveillance of Banyamulenge, particularly religious leaders, and warned Burundian citizens against renting accommodation to members of this community. Such statements risk encouraging stigmatization and mistrust towards the entire community.

CDH/VICAR is particularly concerned that Burundi's military involvement in the conflict in the DRC could lead the authorities to collectively regard Banyamulenge refugees as sympathizers or collaborators of the armed groups they are fighting in the DRC. Such collective association would be contrary to the fundamental principles of international refugee protection.

CDH/VICAR recalls that Burundi is a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, its 1967 Protocol, and the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. These instruments establish obligations concerning refugee protection, including respect for the principle of non-refoulement and protection against persecution and discrimination.

In light of this situation, CDH/VICAR considers that recurring threats, proposed restrictions, and recent arrests warrant urgent intervention by international protection mechanisms.

CDH/VICAR Makes the Following Recommendations:

To the Government of Burundi:

1. Guarantee the safety of Banyamulenge refugees and put an end to any collective association of this community with armed groups operating in the DRC.

2. Refrain from imposing discriminatory measures requiring the forced relocation of Banyamulenge refugees to refugee camps and respect their fundamental rights.

3. Ensure that arrested individuals enjoy the presumption of innocence, access to legal assistance, and fair judicial proceedings.

4. Strictly respect the principle of non-refoulement and refrain from any forced return to the DRC.

To the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR):

5. Conduct an urgent and independent assessment of the risks faced by Banyamulenge refugees in Burundi**.**

6. Strengthen protection and monitoring mechanisms to prevent arbitrary arrests, intimidation, and potential refoulement.

7. Advocate with States willing to receive these refugees and facilitate their voluntary transfer to other safe host countries.

To the International Community:

8. Closely monitor the situation and support international protection mechanisms that would enable Banyamulenge refugees facing threats in Burundi to move to other host countries.

CDH/VICAR reaffirms that the protection of refugees must remain a priority, regardless of political and military considerations related to conflicts in their countries of origin.

Done on October 12, 2026

For CDH/VICAR

President