

8. The 'Chasing' of the Banyarwanda

On 30 September 1982, another wave of ethnic persecution began, this time in Ankole, in the south-west of Uganda. In the days that followed, over 75,000 people were forcibly evicted from their homes in what came to be known as 'The Chasing of the Banyarwanda'. Some 35,000 people took refuge in existing UNHCR refugee camps in the south of Ankole; another 40,000 fled to Rwanda, where they in turn were placed in camps. The human tragedy was enormous. One knowledgeable commentator lamented: '... of all the refugee situations of recent years, this of the Banyarwanda was among the most preventable'.³⁷ Once it had been created, however, it was also one of the most difficult to put right.

Those affected were from three different ethnic groups (see Chapter 2). Two of them, the Batutsi and Bahutu – known collectively as the Banyarwanda – had arrived from neighbouring Rwanda and Burundi during the previous 100 years. Their absorption into Uganda may be traced to four events. Firstly, in the late 19th century, an abortive invasion of Ankole by the Mututsi king Rwabugiri led nevertheless to the establishment of Batutsi chiefs and their Bahutu serfs in the west of the district. Then, in 1910, Belgium and Britain re-drew the colonial boundaries, leaving sections of the Bahutu population as residents of the Ugandan sub-district of Kisoro. Thirdly, from the 1920s onwards, Britain encouraged the emigration of tens of thousands of Bahutu from densely-populated Rwanda, in an attempt to boost Uganda's labour force. Lastly, in the late fifties through to the early seventies, nearly 100,000 Batutsi fled Rwanda as political power began passing to the Bahutu.³⁸ Only those Banyarwanda who arrived after 1959 are technically refugees; the other 900,000 or so became naturalized Ugandans at independence.

The third ethnic group affected, the pastoralist Bahima, originate from Uganda. They are closely related to the Batutsi, and used to enjoy the same master-client relationship with the agricultural Bairu as did the Batutsi with the Bahutu. By 1960, the predominantly Catholic Banyarwanda, together with the Bahima, were aligning themselves with the DP; by contrast the Protestant half of the Bairu tended to support UPC. Jason Clay, in his report for the American organization Cultural Survival, records that Banyarwanda support for the DP became so pronounced that by 1969 President Obote was apparently planning a survey with a view to excluding them from the political process as non-citizens, and eventually expelling them from Uganda altogether.³⁹ Consequently, after Amin's coup, the anti-Obote sentiments of the Banyarwanda and the new military government converged, and there is evidence that during the seventies, many Banyarwanda refugees were encouraged to move out of the refugee camps on to available land in Ankole. After Amin's overthrow, many of these refugees hurried back to the camps, fearing a backlash from the UPC Bairu Protestant faction. This latter group was indeed incensed by the years of perceived exploitation at the hands of both their Bahima 'masters' and the Banyarwanda 'foreigners'.

Shortly before the 1980 elections, partially successful attempts were made to disenfranchise the Banyarwanda voters of Ankole and Kigezi; some Bahima were also affected.⁴⁰ The Banyarwanda and Bahima supporters of DP and UPM represented between 10 and 30 per cent of the population in the south-western districts, and the DP claim that their partial exclusion from the polls facilitated the victory of UPC candidates in eight out of twelve seats in Ankole. The district thus came to represent a considerable pocket of UPC support in the south of the country, and was awarded five cabinet posts by the new administration, four of them going to Bairu MPs (who later became known as the 'Bushenyi clique'). During the next two years, the ethno-political divisions in Ankole became more pronounced. The Banyarwanda were accused of having been among the staunchest of Amin supporters, though there is only limited evidence to support this claim. Only seven Banyarwanda, for instance, featured on a post-liberation list of the 240 most wanted Amin officials and collaborators. The Bahima were similarly condemned on the grounds that they favoured their kinsman Museveni, who was now fighting from the bush. Ministerial statements in early 1982⁴¹ made it apparent that certain government ministers favoured returning all Banyarwanda refugees to the refugee camps, but the plan appears to have been dropped after representations by Tom Unwin, the UNHCR representative in Kampala. Meanwhile President Obote himself was claiming that 'some people had been forced to be refugees in their own country', because real refugees had taken advantage of the hospitality of Ugandans. 'A visitor who does that is inviting himself to be sent away.'⁴² In July 1982, the District Council in Mbarara passed a resolution that all refugees should be moved away from the borders.

However, on 15 September 1982, two UPC youth-wingers and a policeman were shot dead in Mbarara District. Local UPC officials announced that they had been killed whilst investigating instances of cattle theft by Banyarwanda herdsmen, but other reports suggest that it was the youth-wingers themselves who had been discovered stealing cows, and that they had died in the gun-battle that followed. A meeting was apparently held in Mbarara in late September, attended by two of the Ankole ministers – Crispian Rwakasisi (also the national security chief) and Patrick Rubaihayo – together with UPC officials, the local district commissioner, and county and sub-county chiefs. Jason Clay observes: 'At that meeting, local officials were given the go-ahead to move against what were labelled as "Rwandan refugees/Banyarwanda" –

political opponents, both real and imaginary, of the Obote government.⁴³ By 30th September, UPC officials in Mbarara district were announcing that all Kinyarwanda-speakers were to be moved to the refugee camps, with immediate effect. The directive thus applied to all Banyarwanda, whether nationals of Rwanda or Uganda. In practice, about 12,000 Bahima and some Bakiga were also included in the exercise. On 1 October, UPC officials and local chiefs together with the youth-wingers and police, began to sweep through the district. According to a statement subsequently issued by the DP,⁴⁴ there was also assistance given by a large group of the paramilitary Special Force, which had been specially moved to nearby Lyantonde a few days before the start of the operation. The 'Kinyarwanda-speakers' were given the choice of removing themselves to the established refugee camps at Oruchinga and Nakivale, in southern Ankole, or of leaving the country altogether. In fact 5000 of them were 'marooned' at Merama Hill on the frontier when the Rwandese authorities closed the borders to further influxes in November; they remain there to this day. Displacement was effected by force: many people were beaten up, seventeen were allegedly killed; a further seventeen apparently committed suicide rather than face eviction.⁴⁵ Some people were transported by lorry; others were herded into groups and forced to walk – and these people often lost even the little they could carry at the impromptu road-blocks erected on the way. One Mbarara UPC official proclaimed that it would be 'anti-Ugandan' for anyone to provide food or water to the refugees. As a consequence, even more people – especially children and the elderly – died en route. Properties and goods left behind were frequently appropriated by those supervising the operation. Surveys indicate that between one-third and one-half of the victims' cattle were stolen during the course of the operation, or en route to the camps.⁴⁶ Clay estimates that only 25-30% of the people affected by the operation were genuine Rwandese refugees.⁴⁷

The government's response to the events in Ankole developed as follows. First, even during the operations, two of the Ankole ministers – Rwakasisi and Rubaihayo – had toured the district making inflammatory anti-Banyarwanda speeches. One of the two UPC youths who had died was apparently related to Rwakasisi. Next, Unwin, the UNHCR representative, was ordered from the country for allowing the story to be released to the international press. The order was rescinded three days later, after Radio Uganda misleadingly announced that he had 'apologised'. On 19 October, a government spokesman announced that the 'Rwandese' had simply panicked and fled after the original shooting incident. Prime Minister Allimadi delivered the opinion

that the 'refugees' had voluntarily returned home because peace once again prevailed in Rwanda. President Obote, who had been in Italy when the operation began, waited for nearly a month before making a statement. Then, on 29 October, in a communication read to six district councils which were assembled in Mbarara, he stated: 'I am concerned that the aliens, including Rwandese refugees, who left their homes because of rumours of various kinds, did so in circumstances that gave the impression that they were actually forced to flee . . . It is absolutely not true that the government of Uganda, which as you all know is a UPC government, ever authorized or in any way ordered the UPC Youth Movement in your areas to uproot Banyarwanda.'⁴⁸ Clay refers to Obote's statement as being: 'characterized by some as primarily for international consumption.'⁴⁹

However, at the very same meeting, Mr L.R. Makatu, Chairman of Mbarara District Council, declared: 'For the past twenty years, we have been generous enough to accommodate these Rwandese refugees and normal aliens of Rwandese origin, not knowing that we were nourishing a viper in our chest until recently we realized that they were dangerous criminals, killers, smugglers and saboteurs'.⁵⁰ At another meeting at Kamukuzi, six days later, Makatu thanked his audience 'for that work you have done . . . When lifting a roof off a house you cannot avoid nasty happenings that may arise thereof . . . Be patient as the District Council will determine a way for you to divide these [Banyarwanda] properties. Give it time . . .'⁵¹ By this time, Makatu had been appointed chairman of the committee set up by Obote 'to identify . . . who is a refugee from any other state outside Uganda'. He used his power to conduct a mopping-up operation between December 1982 and January 1983, that effectively drove out a further 8000 people.

Despite the praiseworthy sentiments expressed during meetings between the Ugandan and Rwandese governments in late October 1982 and March 1983, Kampala has notably dragged its feet on the issue of repatriating the Ugandan nationals who fled to Rwanda. Although a Ugandan Ministry of Justice team (protected by armed guards) conducted a census among the camp populations inside Rwanda between July and September 1983, its findings have still not been announced. The Rwandese maintain that over 90% of the persons involved are Ugandan nationals, but fear to push these claims too hard, lest their main supply route, which runs through Uganda, be cut. Meanwhile 28,000 agriculturalists (mainly Bahutu) languish in Kibondo camp, almost next to the border, in very harsh conditions. They live in mildewed tents behind barbed-wire fences, and are not allowed out to cultivate food or cut firewood. They are effectively held hostage, as a constant reminder that Rwanda will accept no more Ugandan refugees. The 13,000 pastoralist refugees at Nasho camp (mainly Bahima) have lost almost 40,000 of their 50,000 cattle owing to lack of pasture-land.

The Ugandan government has made no attempt to punish the evictors, compensate the victims, or prevent further instances of displacement. In fact, in December 1983, a further 20,000 Banyarwanda – ‘100% Ugandan citizens’ according to a UN observer – were evicted from neighbouring Rakai and Masaka districts. About 10,000 fled to UNHCR camps in Toro; the remainder became refugees in the Kagera salient of Tanzania.⁵² The Democratic Party MP for Rakai North, Luke Kazinja, issued a press release in which he strongly criticized the Rakai displacements, and apparently linked them to Rwakasisi. A few weeks later, Kazinja disappeared after thirty members of the UNLA raided his house.⁵³ Rwakasisi now allegedly operates his own detention camp at Kamukuzi, Ankole, where political opponents are held.⁵⁴

Even the future of those who fled to the Ugandan refugee camps is insecure – certain ministers have advocated that refugee areas be re-designated as farming land, or as national parks. In the course of the 1982 operations, camp boundaries were reduced, and some refugees’ houses inside Oruchinga were destroyed. Some of the displaced are now claiming that UPC officials inside the camps – such as the Oruchinga camp commander and the Merama Hill medical officer – have been pressurizing them to leave Uganda altogether. (Although over 40% of the heads of household who fled to the Ugandan camps have claims to Ugandan citizenship, most of the remainder are Batutsi refugees, deeply fearful of returning to Rwanda).⁵⁵ In November 1983, 15,000 people and 20,000 cattle from Oruchinga and Nakivale were moved to a new UNHCR camp at Kyaka II, in a bid to alleviate pressures on water and grazing. However, the Kyaka II ‘refugees’ apparently claim that the new camp lies in a tsetse-infested zone, and have expressed fears that they would be used to clear the area, and then asked to leave at a later stage.⁵⁶ There are now 25,000 people at Kyaka II, and the overcrowding has caused increased tensions with local people.⁵⁶

In a speech delivered in Geneva in July 1984, the Ugandan Minister of Culture and Community Development stated that ‘some nasty incidents have taken place which have attracted much international concern’, the reason being that ‘many of the Rwanda refugees identified themselves too closely with the murder squads of the [Amin] regime’.⁵⁷ Whether or not the original directives for the operation emanated from the Kampala high command, there was evidently considerable involvement at ministerial level. The evasions and excuses offered by the government since October 1982 have demonstrated that there is no real willingness to put matters to rights, for Obote and his party have undoubtedly benefitted from the resultant situation. A large proportion of presumed political opponents (including potential NRA recruits) has been removed from the electorate, and the loyal UPC faction in Ankole left to divide the spoils.

- 37 'Refugees in Rwanda and Uganda – The Banyarwanda Tragedy' by Roger Winter, US Committee for Refugees.
- 38 Robert Dodd: 'The Chasing of the Banyarwanda', unpublished, pp 3-4.
- 39 Jason Clay: 'The Eviction of Banyarwanda', (Cultural Survival), 1984, p 28.
- 40 *New African*, Jan. 1983. Clay, op.cit., pp 29-30.
- 41 By the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (5/2/82) and the Ministry of Culture and Community Development (11/2/81). See Clay, op.cit., p 33.
- 42 *Uganda Times*, 11/1/82. See Clay, op.cit., p 33.
- 43 Clay, op.cit., p 3.
- 44 'DP statement on Operations in Mbarara District Affecting Banyarwanda and Other Thousands of People', p 20.
- 45 Clay, op.cit., p 69.
- 46 Ibid, p 3.
- 47 Ibid, p 43.
- 48 'Communication from the President to the District Councils of Bushenyi, Kabale, Kabarole, Kasese, Mbarara and Rukungiri, Assembled in Mbarara Town Hall on 29 October 1982'.
- 49 Clay, op.cit., p 57.
- 50 'Welcome speech by L R Makatu, Chairman of Mbarara District Council' [to the same meeting], 29/10/82.
- 51 'Speech by the Mbarara District Council Chairman to Councillors, County and Sub-County Chiefs, in Kamukuzi Hall, on 4 November 1982'.
- 52 *The Times*, 6/1/84.
- 53 Clay, op.cit., p 8.
- 54 *Munnansi*, 22/5/84.
- 55 Clay, op.cit., pp 37-9.
- 56 Ibid, p 42. See also *Economist Development Report*, August 1984.
- 57 'Intervention of Hon. Dr James Rwanyarare, MP, Minister of Culture and Community Development and Leader of the Ugandan Delegation to the ICARA II, Geneva, 9-11 July, 1984'.