

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

BURUNDI

RETURNING TO THE MOTHER TONGUE

Francine Vyizigiro is 14 years old. She discovered her homeland and mother tongue for the first time at a returnees' camp in Rumonge, Bururi Province. She is one of 13,000 children being repatriated from the United Republic of Tanzania's 'Old Settlements', to where her parents fled in 1972, following Burundi's first major civil war.

For these children, the return to the native land has its challenges. There are differences in educational systems and curriculum. But in this case the children also must quickly learn Kirundi, the national language, and French, the official language, in order to fit into schools in Burundi.

She could have taken the easy way out by getting married like some of her peers have done, but Francine is taking it all in her stride. She expressed gratitude to the Government of Burundi for making primary education free and praised the teachers who she said treated them like their own children. "Now I can speak Kirundi and French fairly easily, but I would like them to give us good accommodation and clean comfortable classrooms."

On 5 September 2008, in Bururi and Makamba Provinces, 875 primary and secondary school-aged children, repatriated from the United Republic of Tanzania, completed a seven-week intensive course in Kirundi, French and life skills, organized by the Government in cooperation with UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP). UNICEF provided teacher training and supplied school materials, buckets and soap, while WFP procured the food items.

Francine's self-confidence was justified; she was the only pupil out of 45 graded by the teachers to move from Primary 6 to Primary 7! But the challenges ahead of her and the estimated 13,000 schoolchildren due to arrive before the end of the year are enormous.

New schools have to be rapidly built and furnished, learning materials supplied, teachers recruited and trained, and health services, water, sanitation and hygiene provided in the new settlements.

Francine and the other children need support to make a fresh start in life. So do their parents who are asking to be allocated one of Burundi's most scarce resources, cultivable land they can finally call their own in order to feed their children.

All of Burundi's friends need to give a helping hand now.