### Situation of people living with albinism in Burundi

There are 900 people living with albinism in Burundi, the majority of whom are found in Bujumbura, Gitega and Ruyigi. They face serious challenges which vary according to the area in which they live. While those in Bujumbura may face limited threats and enjoy a relatively better life style, those in the interior, particularly those living close to the border with Tanzania (Ruyigi, Cankuzo, Makamba) face serious challenges.

**Albinos without Borders**

As a result of the challenges faced by people living with albinism in Burundi, a group of them created an association called *Albinos Sans Frontières* (Albinos Without Borders) on 13 December 2002 by ministerial order No 530/946. The principal objectives of the organization are the protection and promotion of the rights of people living with albinism, particularly the right to education and health, the right to be protected against discrimination, poverty, stigmatization and psychological trauma. Sensitization campaigns on the rights of people living with albinism are also held.

**Challenges faced by people living with albinism**

In most African countries, albinos are believed by some locals to have special magical powers. This is also the case in Burundi. There are different beliefs in Burundi when an albino child is born. Some think that an albino child is a punishment from God because of adultery; others see it as punishment for women who mock or insult other women who give birth to an albino, while to others it is as a result of conception during menstrual period. However, the situation in Tanzania has had a remarkable influence on that in Burundi which has put the life of albinos in Burundi at greater risk. This belief became rampant in Tanzania because traditional practitioners led people to believe that the body parts of albinos can bring luck in life and for other uses. This led to the killing of many albinos in order for their organs to be used for mystical powers.

While there is no clear evidence, the demand for body parts of albinos in Tanzania had a serious effect in Burundi especially around the border areas. The arrest, detention and prosecution of those involved in the assassination of albinos in Tanzania, as well as increased measures to ensure the protection of albinos in Tanzania forced some of those involved in the trafficking of albino parts to turn to Burundi for their supplies in return for huge payment. This led to the increased attacks of albinos in Burundi.

Since 2008, 18 albinos have been killed in Burundi, of which seven were minors. The latest documented case is that of the brutal murder of Chantal Ngendakumana, a 19-year-old student, on 6 May 2012 in Kabezi commune, province of Bujumbura Rural. While asleep with other members of the family, ( the father who works as a night watchman at a nearby school was absent), the children were attacked by six people heavily armed with guns and machetes. All those at home were tied and had their mouths stuffed with paper so they could not shout for help. The victim was taken away about 2 km from the family home where she was murdered. The next day, the representative of albinos in Burundi was informed that they had found the body of the victim in a ditch. Her hands and legs had been cut off and the rest of the body was found covered with a blanket in a hole. She was buried on 8 May 2012.

The search for albinos body parts increased to such an extent that in 2009, it was reported that the bodies of albinos were dug up from graves and some parts including the head were cut off by unidentified people. The association was forced to bury albinos in secret locations to prevent the repetition of this derogatory act.

So far, 11 people have been arrested in relation with attacks on albinos, six of whom escaped under unknown circumstances while five are still in prison. One person was sentenced to 15 years in prison and a fine of 500,000 Burundian Francs.

**Discrimination faced by people with Albinism**

Albinos face discrimination in all walks of life. They are not easily accepted by the community in which they find themselves. Most parents of an albino babies easily abandon them and the men seek divorce from the women if they are married. Sometimes the woman is ill treated and not taken care of by the husband as punishment. A case was reported in which a man slept with a woman because he thought it would bring him luck in his affairs. It resulted in a pregnancy and the woman gave birth to an albino. The man has refused to take responsibility and said he does not want anything to do with albinos. Abandoned children are taken to foster homes by the association where they are looked after by religious sisters.

Access to quality education is difficult for some albinos. Some parents consider sending an albino child to school a waste of time because, according to them, nothing good can come from an albino. Some are not accepted in school or forced to change school because of the way they are treated by school mates. In one reported incident, an albino child was refused admission because other children threatened the leave the school if he was admitted. The principal succumbed to the pressure and the child was not admitted. He was asked to seek admission in another school. Those who manage to go to school face serious challenges. They find it difficult to interact or make friends and play like other children because they are not easily accepted. In such situation some are forced to abandon school. Those who complete their studies find it difficult to get employment. In one case an albino trained in construction could not find a job because he was told that albinos are weak and cannot work. According to other testimonies when they ask for a job, they are told there is no vacancy but later learn that it was because they are albinos.

Albinos children are not properly taken care of when they are sick. Some parents say it’s too costly and see no need for them to spend on an albino child who will bring nothing in return. Most of them suffer from cancer which is costly to treat. As such they are mostly abandoned and are taken care of in foster homes. There are currently 15 albinos suffering from cancer in a foster home in the province of Gitega. Three of them (two children) in an advanced stage have been sent to Tanzania for treatment because Burundi does not have the facilities.

**Protection measures**

Due to increased insecurity of albinos, the Government of Burundi took certain measures to ensure their security. Some were taken to police stations were they spent the nights under difficult conditions. Some were lodged in houses near the communes where they could easily be protected by the police. However, their stay there could not last long because of the difficult conditions. They lacked adequate shelter as some spent the night outside. Some became ill because of the lack of warm clothes and blankets during the rainy season. They lacked food because they could no longer work in their farms and were not fed while in the police stations. Some requested farm lands around the communes but were refused. As a result some of them left the police stations and went back to their house without any protection. They were instructed not to stay out late, to stay indoors at night, not to go to isolated areas and to report any incident to the police. No incident was documented during their stay under police protection. However, on 13 January 2011, in Shombo commune in the province of Karusi a case of rape by a police officer was reported. The perpetrator was immediately arrested and detained.

There are currently five women and two children living under difficult conditions in a house near the commune for their protection provided by the local authorities in the province of Ruyigi which shares borders with Tanzania. They are still living there because they are scared to return to their homes. They work in their farms during the day and return to the commune before night fall. Sometimes people around the communes bring food and clothing for them.

In 2010 and early 2011, albinos were escorted to school by police for security concerns. However, this was stopped because according to the police they were no longer at risk. As a result some were so scared to go to school and decided to drop out.

Not much has been done with respect to the situation of people living with albinism in Burundi. In 2010, following increased attacks on albinos, the government with the assistance of its partners had started to elaborate a national policy on people living with albinism. A study was planned to be carried out but since 2011, no progress had been made.

Sensitization campaigns on protection and promotion of people living with albinism were organized in seven of the 17 provinces (Ruyigi, Cankuzo, Bujumbura, Makamba, Ngozi, Kirundo and Gitega) were people living albinism were very vulnerable. This was done together with other human rights organization.

Every year, the Ministry of Human Rights and Gender comes to the assistance of albinos by providing books. Assistance also comes from other organisations like the European Union, Coopération Belge, *Projet d’appui au Développement Communautaire et Sociale (PRADECS), Fond de Droit Humaine Mondiaux (FDHM) and RCN Justice and Democracy.* Sometimes assistance is given by well wishers and anonymous sources.

**Conclusion**

People living with albinism in Burundi are still vulnerable and need continuous protection. A close monitoring of their situation has shown that they are attacked when everybody thinks the risk is no longer there. There was an increase in the attack of albinos in 2010 which led to certain protective measures being taken. However, in 2012, when they thought the risk had reduced, protection measures were stopped and there was an attack in May 2012.

Besides protection, albinos lack the minimum adequate means to live a quality life. Lack of food, adequate shelter, clothes are some other needs. They also need special medical care because of their condition. There is clearly a need of a national sustainable policy that would include the protection of albinos but take into account their specific problems in schools, medical assistance, etc…