

Uganda and Burundi sign pact on refugees
By Steven Candia, New Vision
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The governments of Uganda and Burundi and the UNHCR have signed the tripartite agreement that will pave way for the voluntary repatriation of Burundi refugees in the country.

The agreement was signed following a two-day meeting in Kampala, chaired Dr. Stephen Malinga, the minister for relief and disaster preparedness.

Malinga signed on behalf of Uganda while Clotilde Niragira, the Burundian minister for national solidarity human rights and gender signed for Burundi, with Mohammed Adar, the UNHCR country representative on behalf of UNHCR.

The agreement among others establishes a framework for the voluntary return of Burundian refugees in Uganda, now standing at about 13000; specifies a right of return of the refugees without any preconditions; defines the responsibilities of the parties and established a tripartite commission and a technical working group.

The agreement will also set in motion a massive information campaign to promote voluntary repatriation, commence negotiations with a third country so as to agree on entry and exit formalities and a follow up meeting for the commission and technical working group in a two month-time in Bujumbura, Burundi.

Speaking at the function Malinga said the signing of the agreement was a special occasion for both governments and the UNHCR. "This is voluntary repatriation and whoever feels that there is now peace in the country should be able to return to their mother country," Malinga.

With the agreement the refugees can repatriated anytime for as long as they express the interest to return.

He hailed the UNHCR for the role it has played in helping refugees. He also praised the Burundian government for working hard to ensure that peace returns to the country.

Uganda, Malinga said, has been home to refugees from all countries in the region and will remain so.

Niragira thanked Uganda for help accorded to the Burundian refugees and pledged that her government will ensure that the refugees return in peace and dignity.

"We are grateful for all the support and intervention of President Yoweri Museveni in the Burundi peace process," she said. Adar on his part hailed the signing of the agreement and thanked Uganda for being a home to about 238000 refugees presently.

The UNHCR, Adar said, is committed to the agreement and will ensure that the refugees are repatriated voluntarily.