Achieving Countrywide Rights Awareness in Burundi

IBJ creates positive change through knowledge

In 2010, IBJ bolstered its legal rights movement in Burundi through the addition of two new Legal Fellows to support the day-to-day operations of its Bujumbura-based DRC and by continuing to conduct hands-on training across the nation. In addition, IBJ’s rights-awareness efforts significantly contributed to an inspiring 45% increase in overall media coverage of criminal justice matters, and its operational support facilitated a 13% increase in the total number of IBJ-trained lawyers dedicating at least half of their practice to criminal law.

IBJ employs a comprehensive approach to rights awareness in order to reach every level of the criminal justice system. In 2010 alone, IBJ reached over 4,000 ordinary citizens during five Street Law campaigns, in which residents of the areas around Cibitoke, Kabezi, Rumonge, Kinama, and Gitega received one-on-one education about their rights in case of arrest. Over 130 detainees in Bubanza, Ngozi, and Gitega provinces also received desperately needed rights-awareness training through IBJ’s “Know Your Rights” programs. Participants immediately felt the impact of this training: 98% of IBJ-program participants indicated awareness of their right to legal representation and 86% were aware of their right not to be tortured.

IBJ also achieved great successes in its efforts to reshape the practices and policies of the criminal justice community. Through a mock-trial training with over 61 lawyers, judges, prosecutors, police officers, and prison directors, IBJ helped to increase systematic understanding of detainee rights and contributed to a 60% overall increase in access of lawyers to their clients in police custody. Additionally, IBJ’s efforts to combat prison overcrowding with the rallying cry, “Freedom is the rule; detention is the exception,” led to a drastic shift in Bu-

Justice Facts:
Burundi

Rule of Law: 11.8/100

2010 Prison Population:
9,844,
114 per 100,000
On March 24, 2010, President Pierre Nkurunziza ordered the immediate release of hundreds of prisoners from Burundi’s overcrowded prisons. The decree targeted several categories of detainees, including pregnant and breastfeeding women, juveniles, and prisoners over sixty years old. A presidential spokesperson announced the decree over public radio using a slogan previously used during IBJ rights-awareness campaigns: Freedom is the rule; detention is the exception.

Prior to this decree, Burundi’s prisons were extremely overcrowded, with 11,000 people incarcerated despite a maximum capacity of 4,050. This overcrowding was exacerbated by many pretrial detainees spending months, if not years, awaiting trial in violation of detention limits. Operating at more than double their capacity, prisons were unable to meet the basic medical, legal, and social needs of inmates.

The release came after many IBJ roundtable discussions on prison overcrowding in 2009 and early 2010. During a roundtable on pretrial detention in Rumonge, participants suggested a mass release of detainees as an appropriate way to address this problem.

This decree is a resounding success for the criminal justice system and human rights in Burundi. Moreover, it appears to indicate a growing governmental consciousness of the need to uphold criminal procedures and safeguard the rights of the accused.