

**Testimony before the  
Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health  
Committee on Foreign Relations  
United States Senate**

**on**

**“The Political and Security Crisis in Burundi”**

**presented by**

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**Wednesday, December 9, 2015**

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Chairman Flake, Ranking Member Markey, members of the subcommittee:

Thank you for the invitation to appear here today to discuss the political and security crisis in Burundi.

By way of background, I currently serve as the Dean's Assistant and Director of Violence Prevention for the Genocide Prevention Program / GPP in the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (S-CAR) at George Mason University (GMU), where I am also pursuing a doctoral degree. I have had extensive experience working with Burundian civil society and non-governmental organizations to promote peace, conflict prevention, social cohesion, and integration of returnees in local communities.

During my four-year tenure with Ligue Iteka, the oldest and largest civil society organization in Burundi, I collaborated closely with UNHCR and other national and international human rights organizations to foster peaceful coexistence. In my capacity as regional coordinator within Ligue Iteka's Monitoring of Returnees Project, I first coordinated resettlement and social cohesion activities in five northern provinces (Ngozi, Kirundo, Kayanza, Muyinga and Karusi) and was then promoted to the position of southern regional coordinator, covering the provinces of Makamba, Bururi, and Rutana, which together had a significantly larger population of returnees and a remarkably larger number of land conflicts to mitigate.

Before joining Ligue Iteka, I held different positions in local and international organizations such as VISPE, Care International, and CNLS. This work inspired my passion to dedicate my life to the quest for peaceful coexistence and social cohesion in Burundi and the African Great Lakes region, which eventually brought me to this hearing room today.

Mr. Chairman, in your letter of invitation to present this testimony, you posed questions in three broad areas of interest. First, what have I learned during my recent trips to Burundi about the perspectives of average citizens toward the current political situation and prospects of violence that may disrupt their lives? Second, what have I learned in discussions with members of the government and opposition parties about how Burundi can prevent further political violence and move toward a clearer path of reconciliation? And third, how do I perceive the role of Burundi's neighbors in the region to facilitate the peace process, diffuse tensions, and get the country "back on track" – plus what role can the United States and other international partners play in improving the situation?

I would like to address each of these issues separately, although you may see some overlap in the discussion. While these are preliminary thoughts, I will be happy to answer your questions and provide clarification or additional information today or in writing later to supplement the hearing record.

A core pillar of Arusha Accords is "ethnic quotas" and this remain unquestionable by both government and opposition in Burundi. Virtually everyone agrees that it is still a good thing to have security forces made up of 50 percent Hutu and 50 percent Tutsi troops. Although the population is actually divided into approximately 85 percent Hutu and 14 percent Tutsi citizens, the government holds to the principle of 40 percent Tutsi and 60 percent Hutu staffers at any administrative leadership post in the country, from the presidency to the administration of the smallest entity, which is the "hill" (*administration collinaire*). Burundi's leadership has called

upon all organizations, national and international, to check and make sure they respect those ethnic quotas, to reflect the make-up of the country's population.

One of the major achievements of the past fifteen years is the power of unity over ethnic divisions. The Burundian people can distinguish ethnic groups from political and personal interests. After decades of artificial segregation, the Arusha Accords and subsequent constitutional and legal reforms successfully brought Hutu and Tutsi together to work in the same office, to plan and implement projects jointly, to govern and to be governed together. At the end of the day, the Burundian people discovered that any leader can be good or bad regardless whether he is Hutu or Tutsi. Now the majority of Hutu and Tutsi know that they have the same destiny and therefore must struggle together and celebrate what they have together. This shared struggle that both Hutu and Tutsi now experience is, however, endangered by a small number of older people who retain vivid memories of ethnic hate the violence it spewed. These few sadly try to embed their fears among younger generations. Our hope is that newer generations – today's young people and their children and grandchildren – will remain united and refuse to inherit the dangerous ideology of the past.

It is widely agreed that the Burundian people need peace. Yet, as in most countries, many people among the government and among the opposition claim that the majority of the populace supports their own cause. Yet the reality is that both Hutu and Tutsi have bad memory of the civil war. They still remember human and material losses caused by that war and they would not like to see this happen again. People in the countryside do not care about president terms or the nuances of constitutional law. They likely know nothing about what the Arusha Accords say about the president's term limits; what they remember is that there has been a popular president who does community service with them and who plays soccer with them.

The people's desire for peace is reflected in how many armed people have been caught and denounced by other citizens, as was the case in Muyinga, Kayanza, Cibitoke, Bujumbura, and elsewhere. The Burundian people do not want any fellow citizens to be left behind because he may endanger the sustainability of peace that they reached the hard way. What they say when you ask them is, "Can you please tell our leaders to ask what the opposition needs and share some of the parliamentary seats with them? They should give them something of political value so that politicians do not lead us into another civil war".

Another question that should be raised is why the violence is mainly occurring only in few discrete areas, especially in some suburbs of Bujumbura, the capital city. One answer is that the capital city is the place where the political classes live. Since independence in 1963, the ruling class and their families have taken advantage of the opportunity to move to Bujumbura to seek an even better life than what they had in their home towns. It was the best place to live for people doing business, military families, and people searching for both government and private-sector jobs. This was also related to the how land distribution had been done in the past few decades, as well as property leasing requirements, rent-to-buy procedures, and so forth.

### **The Arusha Accords – The Burundian people's engagement for unity and forgiveness**

Although the 2005 Arusha Accords did contribute to peace in Burundi, most of the work was done by the people themselves. The Arusha Accords were a blessing from both the international community and leaders of the then-opposition and President Buyoya's administration. In effect, the Arusha Accord was more about power sharing than peace and reconciliation *per se* – although all those were components of the agreement.

What outside observers tend to forget is that the Burundian people, no matter what side they were on as the civil war approached its end, were exhausted. They were tired of war and daily killings and fighting that had been occurring for more than 12 years. People started to ask the fighters to engage in dialogue that could bring peace back, Hutus, on one side, were pressing rebels to stop violent means and start negotiations with the government; on the other side, Tutsi were also demanding the Tutsi-dominated army and government to find ways of talking with the rebels in order to stop the violence.

Even before and during the civil war, there were many communities that had already overcome ethnic divisions. Some Hutus had started to help Tutsis whose houses were destroyed to make bricks and help them return to their properties. The only Tutsis who remained in internally displaced person (IDP) camps were those who had direct ties with people involved in leadership position, those with business activities, and several others who were better off compared to the rest of Burundian population. Those wealthy families decided either to rent houses for their IDP families in cities and suburbs, because they had financial means to support them from there. Other Tutsi families returned or had already returned to their native towns and villages and were interacting productively with Hutu residents on a daily basis.

For Hutu communities, the majority of them had also left regroupment camps (*camps de regroupements*) which were established by the government in order to separate innocent people from those who were then called rebels.

Before the Arusha agreements, there were Hutu and Tutsi communities which had already started to share lives and to help each other, letting go the past ethnic conflict and the losses it caused. Burundians were thirsty for peace, unity and reconciliation.

Some major achievements must be acknowledged:

- a. With the return of security, people do not spend nights in the bush or in holes fearing military attacks or rebel group attacks
- b. Hutus and Tutsi live together; no matter what has been said, all ethnic groups remain united
- c. Most of the Burundian people are less interested in politics, term limits, and leadership positions, but more on economic opportunity and their survival.
- d. Little by little, people are realizing that very few leaders, if any, are more sincerely interested in the people's wellbeing and interests than they are in their personal goals, in most cases financial interests. There are no more leaders who love and care about their people.

### **Different people, different understanding of the crisis, different approaches to resolution**

Current government leaders see few policy issues dividing government from the opposition. For them the problem is between the current government and Western countries that are denying the principles of democracy and sovereignty of Burundi.

There is an underreported cold war competition between the major powers -- China and Russia on one side and the West on the other. Unexploited mineral resources like nickel and uranium play a major role in that commercial conflict. Exploration for minerals is being performed by

two Russian companies. The government, however, is now open to sharing extraction with any other countries, especially since it became clear that the minerals from Nyabikere and Waga are more numerous than it was previously believed. There is so much to extract that more than one company can be granted a concession.

According to current Burundian leaders, the country does not have only one option (a partnership with the United States and European Union). It has also another option to partner with Russia and China in different sectors. Even if it may require some time to decide how to construct such an alignment, it is not politically or commercially impossible.

The army was able to contain violence when some armed groups attacked from Cibitoke in December 2014 and, more recently, when a group of armed fighters came from Rwanda entering through Buyumpu and Kabarore. Note that around 200 fighters were arrested during the operation in Kibira, where those groups were heading.

The concept of genocide is being invented in minds of the opposition to show that the situation is chaotic and they therefore call for external military intervention. As Michael Broache of the University of Tampa and Kate Cronin-Furman of Stanford University noted in the *Washington Post* on November 15, Burundi's situation is “not, nor will it ever be, 'another Rwanda.' It's critical that atrocity prevention efforts take seriously the specific context in which violence is unfolding. Crying 'genocide' instead of calling it what it is – political violence, with the possibility of escalating into crimes against humanity – does nobody any favors, least of all the victims.” In response to calls for military intervention, Patrick Hajayandi of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation wrote in the *Daily Maverick* on the same date that “Foreign military intervention could potentially cause a tense situation to become incendiary. A military intervention is likely to radicalize both parties, and pit them against each other, creating an all-out civil war.”

### **Views of the Government**

The tension between Burundi and other countries as well as the international community started when some countries issued statements that scheduled elections could not take place because there were no required conditions for them to be “fair.” Despite the withdrawal of international support, the elections for parliament and president took place nearly on schedule and the government is ready to maintain that achievement through any means.

In contrast to what many people say, the current government is not opposed to dialogue. Inclusive dialogue has started among all Burundians and this dialogue will include members of the diaspora. The government, however, insists that dialogue is not the same as negotiation. Neither will the process of dialogue include people who were involved in the failed coup of May 2015.

In terms of openness of the current government, the government put the international community as well as diplomatic missions in Burundi on notice that they should state clearly whether they recognize the current government or not. If one country makes it clear that it supports and recognizes the current government, meetings for diplomats or foreign government officials at any level of the country's leadership will be made easier. Some information about a plan to kill the president and some highly positioned leaders has been circulated, explaining why there are restrictions on who can see the president.

Some good initiatives have been taken by the government. A group of teenagers who were

caught during the protests as well as some people arrested during the Kayanza attacks are or have been attending civic education training workshops in Rumonge. After their training is complete, they will be sent back home, where, it is hoped, they will make positive contributions to their communities.

The first group made of underage prisoners has been released and the Red Cross was in charge of bringing them back to their families. This civic education program will continue and needs to be supported.

For adults who are going through trials because of their involvement in the protests, coup, and armed group attacks, there is a window of opportunity for amnesty, but this necessarily will happen after their trials are complete, as a matter of due process.

Finally, the government has pointed out that people working in embassies and other diplomatic missions do not even go to the suburbs of Bujumbura, in order to inquire what the reality on the ground is. This has resulted in many statements being made based on faulty or biased information. The government has issued strong requests that all people involved in the process of addressing the current crisis to visit the whole country and to see how differently the suburbs of Bujumbura look in comparison to other areas, if they wish to write accurate reports on Burundi.

### **Views of the Opposition**

Despite the fact that I was unable to meet with the leaders of the opposition in Burundi, I had interesting and informative conversations with members of opposition groups and political parties. It was explained to me that the major motivation to fight is unequal opportunities that were given to former fighters. While some people were demobilized, another group was left alone even if they were promised to be called later; it appeared that no one cared about them after all.

I heard that the rebellion has structures and that it has members from all ethnic groups and includes youth from some suburbs of Bujumbura who were trained during or after protests. I learned that there is close collaboration with some security forces currently active within the government.

One opposition member I met said that, reflecting on his life experience, he is convinced that, no matter what negotiations come up with, he will not hand his gun back, unless he is properly demobilized because he was lied too many times and he wants to see his life and the life of his family back on track with good economic standing. He still complains about the fact that he and some of his colleagues received nothing more than tennis shoes and a radio as demobilization package. He concludes that his colleague in the field will not accept any decision from the negotiation, because they want to have a representative to the negotiation whose holds, at the very least, the rank of lieutenant.

### **Religious leaders, civil society, and educational institutions**

Religious leaders, especially the Catholic Church have noticed that it is not easy for them to operate in an environment in which they announced publicly their opposition to President Nkurunziza's third term. As damage control, they are calling both parties to dialogue without pushing too hard. They are also trying to cope with the current situation and regain trust because it is the only way they can have their word listened to by both the government and the opposition.

Civil society operates under fear. There are some facts that cannot be addressed in the near future and, therefore, instead of taking extreme positions, those operating in Burundi try to cope with the situation and report with more nuanced analysis to the extent that they can. Civil society requests the government to stop immediately acts of harassment, intimidation and arbitrary detention against members of civil society organizations, journalists and other human right activists and peacebuilders, as well as members of their families carrying out their activities in a risky environment.

Burundian civil society would like to see the establishment of an independent and rigorous inquiry in order to establish responsibility for the violence observed in Burundi since April 2015 and apply any criminal, civil or administrative sanctions applicable under the law

Conditions in educational institutions at every level have deteriorated and may continue to get worse if no urgent support is brought to the country. People I talked to in education unanimously agreed to the following:

There is a general absence of highly educated people in Burundian politics. This may have been due to the many years of civil war, destruction of education facilities, death of experienced educators, and use of force by students to get good grades instead of getting them based on merit. This was noticed in many schools, where instructors were killed or forced to allow students to graduate even when the students did not fulfill the course requirements. The other component is that, many people got positions because they fought the war militarily and this was a reward for the efforts they made in the bush, even if they were not otherwise qualified to do the job.

The other major problem is the new education system Bachelor – Masters- Doctorate (LMD, or *Licence, Maitrise, Doctorat*) which was launched with insufficient studies in term of implementation and transition from the previous system. People in education leadership with whom I spoke were desperate and shared with me the complexity of the situation. They are not very sure where students graduating from the ninth grade will go, they worry that the country does not have instructors who can teach courses such as art, music, and drawing, among other teacher shortages.

Some week-long basic workshops were conducted to equip educators with skills to teach new courses such as English, Swahili, Music, and Arts. Educators themselves testify, however, that they still did not learn enough to allow them to teach those courses adequately.

Finally, some school principals who were dismissed from their leadership position and demoted to teach as basic instructors with the new system, prefer to abandon the job entirely. This has put education in a dire situation.

I personally see the deteriorating education system as a real threat to security in Burundi. If young people do not have access to good education – and consequently to good jobs later – no matter how hard we work to address the current issues, violence will never cease. It is a good thing to call for investments and job creation in Burundi to hire thousands of educated and non-educated youth, but this will only provide “negative peace” insofar as we will not have put in place structures that guarantee better education for all in Burundi.

### **The role of neighboring countries**

Throughout the history, Burundi and Rwanda have been following the same trajectory. They either engage in peace together or they get in trouble at the same time. Courageous analysts have denounced the negative role that Rwanda has been playing in the current crisis in Burundi. It was

not until President Kagame, announced it publicly that the international community started to see how Rwanda has an active role in the Burundi crisis. Hopefully, Rwanda will be soon pressured to abandon that strategy. Other countries also such as Tanzania, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda have a major role in stopping current violence. I am convinced that if all the leaders of the region commit themselves to the cause for peace in Burundi and talk to all the parties in conflict in Burundi through unofficial ways, the current issue will be addressed soon. The problem is that some actors want to use the force and pressure as well as “rule of law” as way to address the conflict. Unless we understand that a gun makes stronger a gunman and that humble and smooth approach to the gunman can convince him to put down his weapon before innocent lives are lost, we will not address the current Burundi conflict.

### **Recommended Actions**

I have several recommendations for actions on the part of the international community, including Burundi's partners in the United States and other countries.

First, we need to improve the economy (job creation, investment and opportunities for youth and other people who are able to work). A big investment plan, not necessarily like the Marshall Plan but sized to fit Burundi's specific needs, will not only promote sustainable peace and security in the country, but will also improve the stability of the region as a whole.

The United States should invest in that small country, because even if it does not have the natural resources equivalent to the DRC or Angola, its high number of active men and women can either be a real asset to grow the economy or they can be a real threat to the region and to the world, if joining terrorist or rebel groups offers better pay and opportunities. The announcement that Burundi will be excluded from AGOA is troublesome in this regard, as well as the fact that competing countries in the region are open to U.S. (and other foreign) investment and may snatch opportunities from Burundi's hands in a way that is not beneficial to the entire region, economically or politically.

Second, we should improve education programs (both long- and short-term with regard to peace education). The long term would improve people's thinking as well as providing leaders who are highly educated, sparking well-strategized leadership and innovative ideologies. We need to make sure the new education model (LMD) is supported sufficiently and experts are sent to Burundi to do capacity building in teaching some courses such as English, art, Swahili, and so forth.

PTSD is a continuing problem in Burundi, so, third, we need to create a substantial program of trauma healing that would be implemented nationwide. This should incorporate a new type of trauma healing approach that would have different layers of activities depending on the roles and responsibilities each person has. The same program should be in some ways included in the peace education curriculum that is needed in schools.

This would also include nonviolence activities and teachings. For several generations, the Burundian people have considered violence as the only alternative to deliver themselves and to help them reach their goals. If new generations are not taught that nonviolence can play a major role in the transformation of systems as well as helping people reach their goals peacefully, it will still be hard for them to reach sustainable peace.

Some other suggestions:

1. Help the government disarm all militias regardless of political affiliation
2. Request the government to restore the freedom of expression, allowing private media (newspapers and radio) to re-open
3. Allow civil society to operate freely and without fear of being arrested and reopen soon their bank accounts that have been frozen for investigation purposes. This goes along with training of civil society personnel and journalists to improve their capacity for reporting and acting responsibly
4. Start extensive campaigns calling refugees to return to Burundi because they are living in inhumane conditions in camps, where the information they get is mostly is biased by political views which overly dramatize the situation in Burundi
5. Strengthen the African Union's human rights observers and require them to have toll-free phones to allow every Burundian to reach them and report misconduct
6. Urge the Burundian government to have conflict resolution experts working with the National Commission for Dialogue, to focus on long-term goals and sustainability of peace in Burundi
7. Sternly urge the Rwandan government not to continue its interference in the Burundian crisis and, if necessary, put in place some sanctions against Rwanda

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today and I will be happy to answer any questions you have and to engage in a productive and informative discussion with my fellow witnesses.

Sixte Vigny Nimuraba