

**Testimony of Assistant Secretary Linda Thomas-Greenfield  
Bureau of African Affairs, U.S. Department of State  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health Policy  
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Thank you very much Chairman Flake, Ranking Member Markey, and other Members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify today on the many challenges facing Burundi.

The Department of State and the Bureau of African Affairs in particular greatly appreciate the bipartisan support we continue to receive for our work, our embassies, and our people who spend every day striving to promote U.S. national security, foreign policy, and economic interests on the African continent.

In Central Africa, we have focused on strengthening democratic institutions, spurring economic growth, advancing peace and security, and promoting opportunity and development. Occupying significant attention over the past year, Burundi has sadly become a cautionary tale for the region about how a leader who will do anything to stay in power can undermine a decade of peace and post-conflict reconciliation.

The current crisis in Burundi began more than a year ago when the Burundian government began an increasingly repressive crackdown against journalists, civil society, and all political opponents. In the months leading up to his decision in April 2015 to stand for a third presidential term in Burundi President Pierre Nkurunziza's government was responsible for increasingly harsh repression, intimidation, and violence towards legitimate political opposition, independent media, and anyone within his own party who dissented against this plan. Credible local and international human rights groups have documented a

harrowing number of cases of torture and extra-judicial killings over the past two years. Nkurunziza's pursuit of "non-inclusive, non-consensual elections" – as characterized by the African Union's October 17<sup>th</sup> communique – after a decade of irresponsible governance and failure to alleviate poverty in Burundi – sparked the current crisis. His decision to pursue a third term also clearly violated terms of the 2000 Arusha Agreement which led to the end of the Burundian Civil War and became the foundation for relative peace and security over the past decade. Furthermore, the presidential elections, held in late July, were widely viewed as not credible, not fair, not free, and not transparent.

Since the election, we have seen the crisis in Burundi only worsen – with the Nkurunziza government taking an increasingly hard line against any form of perceived opposition or critique, even if it comes from within the ruling party's ranks. The crisis has for months been characterized by a daily pattern of retaliatory attacks between security forces and armed elements of the opposition or those perceived to be opponents of the ruling party. More recently, this has included beheading and disembowelment of victims. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has documented at least 240 killings of individuals in Burundi since April. Members of the ruling party, including public security forces, have used extreme violence with impunity and targeted the most vulnerable members of the country's population, namely those trying to flee the country as refugees. The government has not taken action to seriously investigate credible allegations of human rights violations and abuses by members of the ruling party youth wing, known as the *Imbonerakure*, the Burundian National Police, and the National Intelligence Service, nor has the government taken action to hold these same groups accountable.

The repression and violence have forced over 220,000 Burundians to flee into neighboring countries since April, when Nkurunziza announced his decision to

pursue a third term. Many of those attempting to flee have reported violent confrontations by party militias and police while en route. Since the crisis began in April 2015, amorphous groups of armed opposition actors have also carried out violence against the security services and key targets in Bujumbura, and in Burundi's border areas, further exacerbating the conflict.

Inflammatory rhetoric used by President Nkurunziza and the Senate President threatening a disarmament operation in November stoked fears of greater violence throughout the country. I will discuss this later, but we firmly believe that the consequent outpouring of international messaging and pressure prevented the November 8th ultimatum from being the start of wider-spread violence.

At the same time, some elements opposed to President Nkurunziza have conducted targeted attacks on government officials, police officers, and civilians. These actions also threaten to escalate the situation and spark more widespread violence. While Nkurunziza's cynical attempts to treat all of those opposed to his actions as coup plotters must be rejected, it is equally important for those opposition members who have taken up arms to renounce violence and fully commit themselves to reaching a political consensus for the way forward.

As this crisis has unfolded, we have been actively engaged with Burundian and regional stakeholders, donor partners, and other allies in preventing Burundi from returning to war. We believe that our direct engagement with the Government of Burundi and opposition members, as well as our broader outreach to the region and international community, has impacted the situation by helping to hold off wider-spread violence and giving us a window to support regional efforts to find a political solution through internationally-mediated dialogue. But that window of time will not last indefinitely. The underlying calculus of the government - that it will use all means necessary to retain power - has not changed.

Since the discredited election and an increase in violence, we have pursued an aggressive three-pronged strategy to prevent mass violence by: 1) directing pressure at the Government of Burundi and armed opposition to step back from increasingly violent action; 2) accelerating the launch of credible peace talks under African leadership to find a political solution; and 3) supporting regional contingency planning by the AU in case violence worsens.

We are in daily contact with the Burundian government and opposition, and regional leaders. Our senior leaders, including President Obama, Ambassador Rice, Secretary Kerry, Ambassador Power, Assistant Secretary Malinowski, and I have called or met with stakeholders throughout Burundi and the region with the top line message to refrain from violence and to pursue dialogue. For example, earlier in November, President Obama delivered a video message directly to the Burundian people calling on the country's leaders to seek a peaceful solution for the country through dialogue. The video was very well received by the region, specifically the appeal to all for non-violence and the recognition of the military's professionalism and restraint thus far. President Obama has also reached out to regional leaders such as South African President Zuma to call for calm and press for a dialogue that can bring about a long-term solution to the crisis. Special Envoy Perriello has spent the bulk of the past three months in the region and Europe, including emergency deployment to Burundi to deter the launch of Operation Kora, a government-planned public disarmament campaign, in early November. Ambassador Liberi and our Embassy staff have worked around the clock under intense circumstances to maintain crucial lines of communication and provide a voice for peace and human rights.

Since the beginning of the electoral cycle, we have called on Burundians and regional actors to play constructive roles and to reject violence before, during, and after the presidential elections. Our messaging has targeted the government and its

supporters for unlawful violence against peaceful protestors, the participants in the attempted illegal seizure of power last May, and any others who have sought or are seeking to use violence to advance their agenda.

We have also joined our donor partners in increasing the costs for the regime and armed opposition for the use of repression and violence. We suspended in-country delivery of the Train and Equip mission of our Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance peacekeeping program as well as provision of assistance under the African Military Education Program. We also suspended International Law Enforcement Academy and Anti-Terrorism Assistance training that had been provided to Burundian law enforcement agencies. In early November we announced that AGOA trade preference benefits will be withdrawn from Burundi effective January 1, 2016.

More recently, President Obama announced an Executive Order on November 23rd, imposing economic sanctions and a travel ban on four individuals, two officials within the government and two of the May coup plotters. The establishment of a sanctions regime underscores the severity of the crisis and the President's commitment to using all tools available to pressure Burundian stakeholders to resist violence and seek a political resolution. With the sanctions regime in place, we will not hesitate to add additional individuals to the list, including those aiding and abetting individuals already sanctioned. We continue to assess whether to designate additional individuals or entities for sanction under the Executive Order.

It heartens me to see the Burundian people continue to reject attempts to turn the ongoing political crisis into an ethnic conflict. This crisis is first and foremost a political one, driven by a break within the ruling party over Nkurunziza's insistence in staying in power. While we remain vigilant about any attempt to turn this crisis into an ethnic conflict, it is important to remember that until the advent

of this crisis, Burundi was considered a success story in overcoming ethnic division. The integration of the military and civil society are models of post-conflict reconciliation, and have remained a strong, but fraying bulwark against efforts to divide and inflame. The outcome of this crisis will determine whether the youth in Burundi, which make up the majority of the population, remain a relatively post-ethnic generation, or whether ethnic and political divides are locked in for more decades.

The best route for resolving this crisis remains an internationally-mediated dialogue amongst all Burundian stakeholders that is hosted outside of Burundi so all stakeholders can safely attend. Members of the East African Community (EAC) entrusted Ugandan President Museveni back in July to facilitate such a dialogue, and our top diplomatic priority is accelerating the start of this process, whether in Kampala, Addis, or Arusha. Each day without credible peace talks is read as a permission slip for the government or the opposition to escalate repression and violence. We simply cannot afford further delay, and that is our top message to the region. If war breaks out before the dialogue starts, the EAC could end up being partially blamed for the delay in starting a dialogue.

The very existence of talks, even if they falter, would release pressure and give the international community and the region a focal point for diplomatic pressure on all sides. We continue to reach out to President Museveni, the African Union, and other EAC leaders to press them to immediately convene a dialogue. We have made known that we are ready to support the dialogue, including through the international team of envoys as observers. We strongly support active AU leadership and the need for a full-time mediator.

While we continue to strive for a political solution, we are urging our UN and AU partners to undertake contingency planning for the worst case scenario. We believe the best and most viable option would be an AU-mandated regional

force, possibly with the East African Standby Force. We are in regular contact with the AU and made clear our readiness to help should the situation call for regional, multi-lateral intervention.

We continue to be seized by this crisis, and are working with the EAC, AU, EU, UN and others. Special Envoy Perriello plans to join the EU, AU and UN Envoys for the Great Lakes Region of Africa for a visit to Burundi and its neighbors later this month, as well as to Addis and Kampala to press the urgency of talks.

Despite our best efforts, we recognize that more must be done to ensure that Burundi can exit the path of violence and shift toward a peaceful settlement of the political crisis. The international community remains engaged, and we have been active in New York, Geneva, and bilaterally to keep Burundi on the international agenda. The UN Security Council is considering a visit to Burundi early in the new year. The Pope appealed for peace in Burundi during his recent visit to Africa. We will continue to encourage international pressure and visibility on the Burundi crisis so that all the interlocutors fully understand the stakes.

The crisis in Burundi has also beset its neighbors with refugees continuing to cross into Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, and the DRC, and at times exacerbated existing regional tensions. We have encouraged all of the EAC's leaders and the broader region to support peace and dialogue and ensure this crisis does not become another protracted regional conflict that dominates the continent's time and resources.

At the same time, other regional leaders themselves are contemplating efforts to extend their own terms in office beyond constitutional limits. President Obama articulated the U.S. position on this very clearly in Addis Ababa in July when he said that Africa's democratic progress is put at risk when leaders refuse to step aside at the end of their terms. He added that leaders who try to change the

rules to stay in power solely for personal gain risk instability and strife in their countries, and we are seeing this play out in Burundi, in the Republic of the Congo, where a referendum was just held on a new constitution that would allow President Sassou N'guessou to run again by doing away with term limits provisions, and elsewhere. Our policy position enjoys overwhelming support across Africa, particularly from its youth.

We have engaged directly with the presidents of this region approaching elections with that very same message. As Secretary Kerry wrote in an October 6 op-ed, this is a decisive moment for democracy in Africa. While each situation and each country context is unique, the steps that we take now to encourage peaceful transitions may help to prevent similar crises from occurring. The Burundi crisis is a cautionary tale for others in the region. No leader wants to be in Nkurunziza's situation, fearing for his life, watching his nation's economy plummet and his citizens flee the country. Others in the region still have an opportunity to avoid Burundi's path and make the right decision for their country and their people.

Senator Flake, Ranking Member Markey, and Members of the subcommittee, thank you again for holding this hearing and giving me the opportunity to brief you on the steps we are taking to address the situation in Burundi. I hope this information is helpful to the subcommittee. I am glad to answer any questions you might have.