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## Press Release

### Burundi: Citizenship in crisis

*Bujumbura, Burundi, 31 July 2015*

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Burundi is facing a citizenship crisis as a result of the current political violence that risks escalating into protracted conflict, Impunity Watch warned in a new research report, *Burundi : La citoyenneté en crise*. Conducted among *pro*- and *anti*-third term youth in Bujumbura Mairie, Buzanza and Cibitoke, the research finds that youth from both sides are already mobilising to defend their citizenship at all costs, and that the presence of weapons makes the resort to arms all the more likely.

The research, the first publication of a new *Great Lakes Dispatches* series, found extreme levels of polarisation between the two camps, each side emphasising the principles of patriotism and the defence of democratic institutions to justify their positions.

“These protests are nothing more than a means to bypass the exercise of democracy under false pretexts”, decried one *pro* third term youth, “because they are incapable of being elected through the ballot box.” By contrast, youth from the opposing camp proclaimed that the third term is a step too far after years of abuses, pushing them to mobilise in the name of “our democracy”.

#### **A political, not ethnic crisis**

In spite of the polarisation, all of the youth interviewed by Impunity Watch affirmed that the years of ethnic polarisation have passed and that the reasons for the current crisis are political not ethnic. Yet the research highlights an underlying ethnic dynamic as a result of the failure to appropriately deal with the past. The balkanisation of Bujumbura during the years after the assassination of Ndadaye in 1993 was evoked among the *pro* third term youth by referring to the neighbourhoods where the protests began as predominantly Tutsi. Memories of past violence, including the ethnic cleansing of neighbourhoods, have been transferred to younger generations of Burundians, creating a phenomenon of fear anchored in the collective imagination – even of those not born at the time of the worst massacres.

“This dynamic highlights three important factors in today’s Burundi”, affirmed David Taylor, Head of Mission of Impunity Watch in Burundi. “First, despite many of the ingredients for mass violence being in place as the violence increased, including manipulation by political actors of the ‘ethnic

card', the majority of youth from both sides refused to repeat the mistakes of their parents, by rejecting the ethnicisation of what are political issues. Second, the spirit and the letter of Arusha should be defended at all costs; but third, there is still much work to be done with respect to addressing the legacies of violence and impunity in Burundi."

**"Nothing but death in the near future"**

The conclusions of the research therefore call for an enlarging of the debate on the issues at stake to consider the deeper, structural causes of the present crisis. Beyond the question of the third term of President Nkurunziza, finding a durable solution for peace and stability must tackle questions of truth, justice, good governance, corruption, the economy, and of course democracy. Impunity Watch nonetheless highlights that these difficult questions have been habitually ignored, in part owing to the prioritisation of stability by donors and the international community in post-conflict Burundi at the expense of genuine transformation of Burundian society towards a veritable democracy.

Impunity Watch warns that, today, all of the elements are in place for armed violence to once again break out. The young people interviewed during the research are fully aware of this risk, certain of them may even wish that this war will happen. Others, like this 20-year-old with no experience of war, spoke with tears in her eyes because she sees, "nothing but death in the near future".

Although difficult to predict the final outcomes of the crisis, through the eyes of young Burundians it is clear that the Burundi of tomorrow will not be the same as the Burundi of today, much less that of yesterday. Originally based on citizenship, this crisis could ultimately prove beneficial for Burundian society if its political leaders are ready to meet the expectations of Burundi's young citizens and moreover prevent the type of violence feared by this young woman and her peers.

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*For more information on the research or the Great Lakes Dispatches series, please contact:*

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