

Press Release

Impunity Watch extremely concerned by ongoing violence against protestors, journalists & human rights defenders in Burundi ahead of the upcoming elections

Utrecht, the Netherlands, 28th April 2015

Impunity Watch (IW), the Netherlands, is extremely concerned by the ongoing violent crackdown on protestors and condemns the brazen violation by the authorities of the legitimate right of Burundians to freedom of assembly and association. IW condemns the move by the Burundian authorities to target the independent media and human rights defenders, constituting flagrant violations of the right to freedom of expression. IW notes with great concern the events of the last few days threaten the fragile stability of the country, including the erosion of itself of the culture of impunity that lies beneath the current crisis, and which prevents democratisation and transformation from violence.

Context

Since the morning of Sunday 26th April 2015, the end of the civil war has rocked the capital. The situation is a nature not witnessed in Burundi since the numbers of protestors have taken to the streets following the announcement that incumbent President, Pierre Nkurunziza, had been selected by the ruling CNDD-FDD as the presidential candidate for the upcoming elections.

Protestors are heeding the call of opposition parties and civil society for widespread protests against a possible unconstitutional third term in office for the President. As both the United States¹ and the United Kingdom² have noted, the nomination of Pierre Nkurunziza represents a violation of the term-limits set out in the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement of 2000.

Violence in Bujumbura

Impunity Watch (IW) observes that what started as a peaceful, non-violent protest on Sunday morning soon descended into bloodshed as protestors were met with violent suppression by the police, including the use of live ammunition. At least three unarmed protestors were reported killed by Sunday evening.

As the demonstrations continued throughout Monday 27th April and larger numbers of people rallied to join the protests, IW condemns the move by the authorities to crack down on any form of dissent, targeting in particular the media and human rights defenders. We condemn the arrest of prominent human rights activist, Pierre Claver Mbonimpa (APRODH), now released, the suspension of the 'synergie des médias', the closure of the largest independent radio station, RPA, and the continuing threats against other independent media. IW highlights that these moves followed a ban on all radio stations from reporting live on the protests and the blocking of broadcasts by all of the country's independent radio stations to the country's interior.

IW is deeply concerned by the presence of the *Imbonerakure* youth wing of the CNDD-FDD on the streets of Bujumbura, including claims that they had been issued with police uniforms to join the crackdown on protestors. Clashes between the *Imbonerakure* and protestors have been reported as the former appear

¹ Press Release, U.S. Embassy Greatly Concerned About the Events Occurred in Bujumbura on April 26, April 27, 2015. Available at: <http://burundi.usembassy.gov/pr-042715.html>.

² UK Statement on Burundi, UK calls for calm and urges President Nkurunziza to reconsider his candidature for upcoming presidential elections, 26 April 2015. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/uk-statement-on-burundi>.

to be actively seeking to eliminate political dissenters. Worrying reports from the ground confirm that makeshift roadblocks have been erected and self-defence groups formed in many neighbourhoods across Bujumbura to prevent the advances of members of the police and *Imbonerakure*, who are now apparently working in unison to target civilians.

Culture of impunity

IW profoundly regrets the decision of the authorities to resort to violence and to the deployment of the *Imbonerakure* to suppress legitimate political dissent.³ The total disregard for the rights of Burundians and the violence perpetrated against protestors is an example of the culture of impunity that envelops Burundi, starting with many of the country's political elite.

We note with great concern that the events of the last few days threaten the fragile stability of Burundi, including the country's ability to rid itself of the culture of impunity that lies beneath the current crisis, and which prevents genuine democratisation and transformation from violence. As the United States notes:

Violent suppression of dissent and intimidation of citizens who have a right to protest peacefully is unacceptable in a nation that wishes to strengthen its democratic transition from a post conflict society. Burundians have worked hard to achieve peace, prosperity and freedom of expression since the signing of the Arusha Agreement, and their efforts must not be in vain.

Burundian authorities must halt the violence; International actors must not stay silent

- IW insists that the Burundian authorities must respect the rights of all Burundians to protest. We demand that the authorities ensure that the police exercise their powers in respect of the law, including that they refrain from violence against unarmed civilians.
- We call upon the authorities to immediately rein-in the *Imbonerakure*, bring to justice any of its members accused of intimidation, violence or killings, and ensure the immediate cessation of violent crackdowns.
- We call upon the authorities to launch independent and impartial investigations into all pre-election violence and killings, and remind the persons responsible for these crimes that they are subject to prosecution domestically and internationally.
- IW urges the CNDD-FDD to pay attention to the legitimate grievances of Burundian citizens by reconsidering its decision to nominate Pierre Nkurunziza as its presidential candidate for the upcoming elections.
- To the international community, IW commends the example set by the United States and the United Kingdom and calls upon all members of the international community concerned by the developments in Burundi to not remain silent.
- IW exhorts the international community, in particular partner countries of the government of Burundi, to condemn the ongoing violence and attacks on basic freedoms in the strongest possible terms, using their leverage to ensure that the authorities immediately put an end to the violence.
- IW urges actors working with the Burundian security forces, in particular the governments of the Netherlands and Belgium, to publicly denounce any disproportionate use of force by the police and publicly state their support for the legitimate rights of Burundians to exercise their basic freedoms.

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³ It should be recalled that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights branded the *Imbonerakure* as a 'militia' committing human rights violations with impunity at the conclusion of his recent visit to Burundi.