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The Honorable John Kerry  
Secretary of State  
Washington D.C. 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Worrying developments in Burundi greatly increase the likelihood of dramatic reversal of democratic gains and mass killings in the foreseeable future. There are already reports of government-planned killings in neighborhoods of Bujumbura seen as supporting the popular protests. Prevention is necessary and time is of the essence.

Burundi is an important partner for the United States Government. Burundi provides the second largest contingent of 5,432 troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia funded by the US State Department. It is a critical ally in the fight against al-Shabaab and contributes to maintaining regional stability. The US is Burundi's largest bilateral donor and provides crucial assistance in the health, nutrition and socio-economic sectors.

Burundi is a country with a history of political violence and civil war, including genocide. Recent events in the country threaten to plunge Burundi back into civil war. The US cannot allow this to happen for several reasons. First, the US and international partners have pledged to prevent any future mass atrocities. Second, the crisis in Burundi could spill over to other countries, triggering a regional crisis. Third, the collapse of Burundi would harm US counter-terrorism efforts by undermining a key regional partner. Last but not least, the failure to deter heads of state from extending their constitutionally limited mandates and/or breaking with negotiated peace accords sets a negative precedent regionally and internationally. We, the signatories, urge the US government to apply all diplomatic and economic pressure to the Burundian government to swiftly and peacefully resolve the crisis.

### **Recap of recent events**

The US condemned the illegal, failed coup d'état attempt that took place in Bujumbura on May 13, 2015. The coup attempt followed two weeks of popular demonstrations against the candidacy of outgoing President Pierre Nkurunziza to run for a third term. The question of the third term is at the heart of the current conflict and remains unresolved. Demonstrations against the third term candidacy have resumed since the coup attempt. There is great risk of escalating and organized repression against the demonstrators and opponents to the third mandate. Overall, since the beginning of the protests on April 26, at least 50 people have been killed during violent clashes between demonstrators and security forces. Even more worryingly, in his address to the nation after the coup attempt, the President equated civilian protestors with coup supporters, whom he recently labeled 'insurgents'.

In the wake of the coup attempt, all independent private national media have been destroyed or shut down. At present, only the public national radio and two private religious stations are broadcasting. This has raised fears among the population of political violence remaining unreported, especially in the interior of the country. Many civil society leaders, media figures, and those former government officials who have spoken out against the third term have either gone into hiding or have fled Burundi due to ongoing threats. Opposition parties are systematically denied the right to campaign and face intimidation and arrest. As the government repression grows, there are increasing signs and risks that the protest movement will itself radicalize.

Observers warn of retaliatory attacks directed at those accused of having supported the failed coup attempt. According to media reports and Human Rights Watch, the Burundian police attacked a hospital on Friday, May 16, where soldiers allegedly implicated in the coup attempt were being treated. The lawyers of the 17 coup supporters that appeared in court on Saturday, 16 May, accuse the government of having tortured their clients. Reports from the ground reveal that parts of the *Imbonerakure*, the youth movement of the ruling party, have reinforced their intimidation campaign against the population in the neighborhoods of the capital that have been most affected by the protests. Over the last days, armed *Imbonerakure* have undertaken regular nightly patrols in the capital to intimidate the population from taking to the streets. During the ongoing election campaign of the ruling CNDD-FDD party, informants report that armed *Imbonerakure* have threatened to kill anybody that would demonstrate against the third term. Reports from the interior of the country also indicate repression against people that have opposed the third term candidacy, where *Imbonerakure* have also intimidated people that have expressed support when they first heard about the coup attempt.

So far, at least 110,000 people have fled Burundi to find refuge in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Tanzania. According to UNHCR, the police have used roadblocks and checkpoints to prevent people from leaving. Journalist reports indicate that government officials were checking cell phones of those fleeing for evidence of association with the coup attempt or the protests.

## **Plan of Action**

### *Intense political pressure*

The US government needs to continue its firm advocacy against the third term candidacy of President Nkurunziza. It must call on all parties to restrain from violence. While the Burundian government announced a short delay to the communal, legislative and presidential elections, this is not enough. The US government must pressure the Burundian government to postpone in good faith the upcoming elections until a political solution and an election date acceptable to all political parties can be found. The postponement period must serve to create a more conducive climate to hold free and fair elections, including the reopening of the national independent media, the disarmament of youth affiliated to political parties and the authorization of election campaigns by the opposition parties.

Like some of its European counterparts, the US must consider suspending parts of its \$14 million budget in support of electoral activities. The US Government must quickly leverage the Leahy Law to suspend aid to the Burundian military and government when evidence shows that security forces are engaging in human rights violations.

In addition, the US should consider appointing a Special Envoy, or ensuring the final appointment of the vacant Great Lakes Envoy position, to work with all parties to mediate a de-escalation of violence and maintenance of the Arusha Accords.

## *Sanctions*

The US government should consider sanctions against the Burundian government to supplement the political pressure. Sanctions should target government leadership and avoid placing additional burdens on impoverished local populations. Targeting individual perpetrators of violence with financial sanctions and restrictions on travel could prevent further aggravation of conflict and sourcing of arms.

## *International Support for Military Intervention*

While direct military intervention by any outside nation or force is unlikely, the US government should support and encourage the deployment of the East African Standby Force (EASF), operational since December 2014, or another body willing to prevent or contain the eruption of mass killings if necessary. In this regard, the AU Summit's recent decision to send military experts to support disarmament of militias and other armed groups needs to be supported.

Given that the US government (together with the United Nations) has ordered the evacuation of all eligible family members and non-emergency personnel, the Burundian population has the impression that the international community is abandoning the people of Burundi. It would therefore be important for the US government to reassure the population that its main diplomatic presence will stay in the country and continue to monitor the situation closely.

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