



Burundi's President Must Investigate Peacekeeper Sexual Abuse

The Work of the UN Inquiry on Burundi Isn't Done

September 17, 2020: It remains a stunning, and largely unrecognized, fact: the United Nations pays the government of Burundi for the privilege of using Burundian soldiers as UN peacekeepers in the Central African Republic (CAR), soldiers who are part of a force that has been accused by the *UN itself* of committing crimes against humanity.

Today the UN body that leveled the accusation—the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Burundi—released its new [report](#), alleging that the conduct of Burundian government forces has not improved. The report says that its “list of alleged perpetrators of crimes against humanity” includes individuals who “hold senior positions in the new government and have been promoted within the defence and security forces since the new President, Mr. Ndayishimiye, took office.”

The report comes at a pivotal moment in Burundi's history. On June 8, the country's notorious despot, President Pierre Nkurunziza, died of what his government claimed was heart failure but many suspect was in fact COVID-19. Ten days later, Évariste Ndayishimiye, a senior official in Nkurunziza's government who had just won a disputed election, was inaugurated as president two months earlier than planned. President Ndayishimiye has since [pledged](#) to “undertake wholesale reform,” which has won hearts in some corners of the international community.

Next Wednesday, September 23, the COI will appear before the Human Rights Council in Geneva. The question of whether the COI should continue to investigate conditions in Burundi will be a subject of debate. A letter signed by 43 human rights and civil society organizations [calling](#) for the COI's mandate to be renewed makes crucial arguments. “Changing political realities do not amount to systemic human rights change, and the Council has a responsibility to continue supporting victims and survivors of violations and working to improve the situation in Burundi,” the letter states.

The COI mandate must not be permitted to end until President Ndayishimiye can show the world that he is a different kind of leader than the odious Nkurunziza. UN Secretary-General António Guterres must call upon him to order the investigation and prosecution, if necessary, of Burundian soldiers serving in UN Peacekeeping who have been accused of sexual crimes.

Since 2015, the UN has determined that reports of rape or sexual assault lodged against 43 military peacekeepers from Burundi have met the credibility threshold for inclusion in the organization's Conduct in UN Field Missions database. The alleged victims include 49 children, 27 adults, and five individuals of unknown age.

Once the UN determines that an allegation against a military peacekeeper is credible, it refers the matter to the soldier's sending state, which is responsible for investigation and prosecution. None of the 43 Burundian peacekeepers in the UN database has faced criminal punishment.

It's little wonder why. According to an internal UN evaluation report on the mishandling of an investigation into dozens of sexual abuse allegations lodged in Dekoa, Central African Republic, Burundian National Investigation Officers (NIOs)—who are responsible for looking into charges against Burundian peacekeepers—are proficient in cover-ups. The Burundian NIOs [sought](#) to catch “minute inconsistencies” in witness statements, more interested in “discrediting witnesses than taking their testimonies,” according to the report. Witnesses “who were not relevant to the allegation were interviewed to ‘frame’ the reported victim, whilst relevant witnesses to the reported matter were not flagged by the NIO team.”

Further, the Commission of Inquiry on Burundi has shown conclusively that Burundian government forces are permitted to commit sexual violence with impunity within Burundi's borders. After a referral from the COI, a three-judge panel of the International Criminal Court (ICC) subsequently found “reasonable basis to believe that the crime of rape as a crime against humanity” was perpetrated by regime forces “against women and girls perceived to be associated with or to sympathize with the opposition against the ruling party.”

The COI, according to today's report, "is concerned about the structural nature of sexual violence in Burundi, as the testimonials collected since 2015 demonstrate that this type of violence persists and confirm the trends identified in its previous reports."

It should be self-evident that Burundian troops do not belong in UN Peacekeeping. As Lambert Nigarura, president of the Burundian Coalition for the ICC, told us, “It is incomprehensible that, just as a Commission established by the United Nations confirms that serious crimes have been perpetrated by the Burundian troops, that same organization (UN) simultaneously uses and pays the same troops to serve as peacekeepers!”

The new COI report calls on Secretary-General Guterres to ensure "that no alleged perpetrator of human rights violations or international crimes in Burundi is recruited for United Nations peacekeeping missions."

In this case, the alleged perpetrator of human rights violations and international crimes in Burundi is the government of Burundi.

Burundi remains in UN Peacekeeping, with 742 contingent troops currently based in the Central African Republic. As such, the government has a contractual obligation to investigate and prosecute sexual crimes committed by its soldiers. The late president of Burundi—whom the UN Secretary-General celebrated as a member of his “Circle of Leadership” dedicated to eradicating sexual exploitation and abuse—ignored peacekeeping obligations. Will the new president do the same?

We detect no signs that President Ndayishimiye intends to address the sexual violence allegations lodged against Burundian soldiers in CAR. Until he does, the international community should give him no benefit of the doubt, confer no honors on him, and enter no contracts with him.

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