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Burundian Soldiers Still Don't Belong in UN Peacekeeping

July 16, 2020: Burundi has a new president—General Evariste Ndayishimiye—but there is no evidence so far that he has abandoned the worst features of his predecessor's reign.

On July 14, the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Burundi formally warned the Human Rights Council that the international community should not prematurely declare a new dawn in Burundi, "as if ... an election and a political transition are sufficient to automatically guarantee the improvement of the human rights situation going forward." The COI emphasized that the new government is composed of officials from the regime of the late Pierre Nkurunziza, including some who are under sanctions for their involvement in crimes against humanity, including rape, torture, and mass killings.

The COI called on President Ndayishimiye to cooperate fully with the COI (whose members have been prevented from visiting Burundi) and reopen the UN Office for Human Rights in Burundi (which was shuttered in February 2019). It called for an immediate release of four journalists and two prominent human rights defenders, all of whom were unjustly imprisoned.

We applaud the COI's call. And we would add that, until the new government goes beyond words to action and offers proof of reform, Burundi has no right to continue serving as a troop-contributing-country (TCC) in United Nations Peacekeeping.

Since 2015, the UN has verified as credible 43 reports of rape or sexual assault lodged against military peacekeepers from Burundi. In every case, the government of Burundi failed to hold the perpetrators to account, despite its contractual obligation as a TCC to do so.

Inexplicably, the UN Secretary-General has long been Burundi's enabler, rewarding the late president's grave crimes and his contempt for the UN with tens of millions of dollars in UN peacekeeping contracts. Last month, Mr. Guterres updated the membership of his *Circle of Leadership on the prevention of and response to sexual exploitation and abuse in United Nations operations* to list "former President Pierre Nkurunziza," posthumously, among the "global leaders who actively support this agenda."

It's time for both Burundi and Secretary-General Guterres to reform.

Before UN Member States offer the benefit of the doubt to a general who rose to power serving a merciless criminal, President Ndayishimiye must first report on the status of every allegation of sexual exploitation and abuse lodged against Burundian peacekeepers serving in the Central African

Republic. His military must commit in writing to investigating all outstanding claims as soon as National Investigation Officers from Burundi (who are required to investigate allegations against Burundian peacekeepers) are free to travel.

To earn the trust and support of the international community, including the right to serve as a TCC in UN Peacekeeping, the Burundian government must also:

- cooperate with the International Criminal Court's (ICC) investigation into crimes against humanity committed in Burundi or by nationals of Burundi outside Burundi. Two days after the ICC prosecutor authorized the opening of an investigation on October 25, 2017, Burundi [withdrew](#) from the Rome Statute—becoming the first country ever to do so.
- allow the World Health Organization (WHO) to resume work in Burundi. On May 13, the Burundian government expelled the World Health Organization team just as the pandemic was worsening in the country.
- allow independent observers to monitor how money from the international community is being spent in Burundi. In June 2020, the World Bank gave Burundi a \$5 million grant to fight COVID-19—yet independent observers remain barred from the country.
- allow foreign media into the country, when safe to do so. The government banned the BBC in March 2019, and the BBC closed its operations in the country in July 2019. Voice of America (VOA) has been [suspended](#) since May 2018.

In the domestic sphere, the Burundian government must:

- remove from positions of power those credibly accused of committing human rights violations. Two members of Ndayishimiye's 15-member cabinet—Prime Minister Alain Guillaume Bunyoni and Interior Minister Gervais Ndirakobuca—are under US sanctions. Ndirakobuca is also under sanctions from France and the European Union.
- disband the *Imbonerakure*, the CNDD-FDD ruling party's brutal youth wing. President Ndayishimiye [oversaw](#) the *Imbonerakure* when he served as Burundi's Chief of Military Affairs.
- end the government crackdown on civil society. In April 2019, the government suspended PARCEM, one of the country's last independent civil rights groups.

During the oral briefing in Geneva on July 14, the COI warned that many "risk factors" are present in Burundi. "The international community," said the COI's chairperson, Doudou Diène, "must remain vigilant and mobilized to encourage action that addresses the root causes of human rights violations."

We are grateful for the tireless work of the Commission of Inquiry.

And we add to its latest call a message to Secretary-General Guterres: The UN—as the embodiment of the international community—and you as its leader have a solemn responsibility to ensure that women and children promised the protection of peacekeepers are no longer endangered by exposure to Burundian soldiers who can rape and abuse with impunity.

This must end.

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