



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BURUNDI'S ELECTION MUST BE POSTPONED

Statement by Paula Donovan and Stephen Lewis, Co-Directors

May 15, 2020: It is a matter of extreme urgency that Burundi's presidential, legislative, and local elections, which are scheduled for May 20, be postponed. Admittedly, it's the eleventh hour, but the contagion of violence, and the viral contagion of COVID-19, make rescheduling imperative.

Three events of the past several days make an unanswerable argument:

On May 14, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Burundi—which has been investigating alleged crimes against humanity committed by Burundian government forces since September 2016—[released](#) an urgent statement in light of the “numerous acts of violence and human rights violations” that have been occurring during the election campaign. The Commission made clear that accelerating violence and the “shrinking of democratic space” put the electoral process at serious risk.

On May 13, the Burundian government [expelled](#) the World Health Organization (WHO) team just as the pandemic inexorably spreads in Burundi. The government has done little to address the COVID-19 crisis. Massive campaign events are being held—making a mockery of physical distancing—in blatant defiance of WHO recommendations. And now the government, in a spasm of defensive irrationality, declares the WHO *persona non grata*.

And, on May 8, the Burundian government [informed](#) the East African Community that election monitors would be required to quarantine for 14 days, effectively preventing them from entering Burundi prior to the May 20 vote. The election will thus be held without any international monitoring to ensure that the vote is free and fair.

Burundi is led by Pierre Nkurunziza, an authoritarian ruler who has been granted the title of “Supreme Guide of Patriotism.” Nkurunziza, who is not standing for re-election, has chosen as his successor a man who is complicit in the alleged crimes against humanity now being investigated by the UN's COI and the International Criminal Court. His name is Evariste Ndayishimiye, a retired army general who has served as minister of the interior and security. “Do not be afraid,” General Ndayishimiye [said](#) of COVID-19 during the campaign. “God loves Burundi and if there are people who have tested positive, it is so that God may manifest his power in Burundi.”

The crisis in Burundi has been worsening as the election nears, as new reports from [Human Rights Watch](#) and [Amnesty International](#) amply testify. Government forces are launching attacks against real and perceived regime opponents. The few remaining independent media outlets are being threatened and harassed. Human rights defenders have either fled the country or been intimidated into silence.

Astonishingly, the UN has helped fund the unrest. The UN [pays](#) more than \$13 million a year—roughly a third of Burundi’s military budget—for the services of Burundian soldiers in UN peacekeeping forces.

Hundreds of Burundian peacekeepers serve in the UN peacekeeping mission in the Central African Republic (CAR) with results that could have been predicted. Since 2015, several dozen Burundian peacekeepers have been reported to the UN for committing criminal sexual offenses against women and children in CAR. Yet none of the 43 accused soldiers have been criminally prosecuted.

It is not possible to hold a free and fair election without international monitors in the midst of rampant and worsening violence while an unchecked pandemic sickens many more Burundians than the government is willing to admit.

And yet the Secretary-General and the Member States of the United Nations are silent. This is a dark hour for the United Nations.

If the worst happens—if Burundians suffer through the fires of another catastrophe—the UN will suffer a blow to its reputation from which it may never recover.

Paula Donovan and Stephen Lewis are Co-Directors of AIDS-Free World and its Code Blue Campaign, which seeks to end impunity for sexual abuse by UN personnel.

[Download](#) a copy of the Code Blue Campaign's recent report on Burundi, *The UN's Deal With a Dictator*.

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