

Written Testimony

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Members of Congress, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Chairman Smith, Representative Bass, and Members of the Committee, I would like to begin by thanking you for convening this timely and important meeting, and for the chance to update you on the current situation in Burundi.

I thank the Committee for the leadership that it has shown in supporting peace in Burundi and for ensuring that American values of tolerance, fundamental freedoms, and democratic dialogue hold a key place in our foreign policy in Africa and the world. I would also like to recognize my co-panelists, Dr. Ndura, Mr. McDonald, and Ms. Wilson, who have each dedicated years to supporting peace in the country, and are among the most thoughtful analysts of Burundian affairs here in Washington.

My name is Mike Jobbins, I work on conflict transformation with Search for Common Ground, and served with Search in both Burundi and the DRC between 2008 and 2010. I have covered the country in one way or another since 2004, and was in Bujumbura in the run-up and during the outbreak of the current crisis. My testimony alludes to some of Search's work in the country, but the views expressed are my own. I will begin by speaking briefly on recent political developments in Burundi, some of the causes of the crisis which the country is currently facing, and then conclude by considering some practical steps to reduce risks and improve the situation.

By way of introduction, Search for Common Ground has worked in Burundi for more than two decades. Search began in 1995, and worked throughout the war, the peace process, and has continued into the democratic era. We continue to address both the immediate crisis and longer-term drivers of conflict, focusing on supporting media, dialogue processes and community actions that prevent violence and support inclusive development and decision-making in the country. In the past two decades, our work has contributed to the peace and reconciliation process, the return of refugees and resolution of land conflict, and the development of a vibrant media sector. The programming in Burundi is supported by a range of donors including USAID, the State Department and the US Institute of Peace, as well as the European Union, UN Agencies, European governments, as well as foundations and individual donors.

Amidst the current crisis, support social cohesion and prevent violence. Our main actions include supporting women, youth, religious, and community leaders to encourage non-violence, producing news programming via our flagship Studio Ijambo radio studio, while also continuing

our longer-term work on land conflict, women's involvement in public life, and integrating conflict resolution education into the schools.

Update on yesterday's elections, and the broader political context. Yesterday, Burundi held presidential elections. In order to ensure objective and transparent coverage of the electoral process, Search assembled a pool of 156 journalists from six radio stations, as well as our own Studio Ijambo, and the Agence Burundaise de Presse to report on the voting process throughout the day.

Three of the eight candidates withdrew shortly before the elections, although their withdrawals were not accepted by the Elections Commission, citing the short turnaround time. The remaining candidates include the incumbent President Pierre Nkurunziza, opposition challenger Agathon Rwasa, as well as candidates from the UPRONA, FNL, and COPA parties, and Nkurunziza is in a strong position to be re-elected. While the tabulating process is still underway, I can report that:

- In general, election-day security was good in most of the country. In Bujumbura, there were heavy gunfire and grenade explosions in a number of neighborhoods on the eve of the elections. One incident was reported in the Nyakabiga area of Bujumbura, where the body of a member of the opposition MSD party was found triggering protests in that neighborhood.
- In terms of voter turnout, as of midday, reporters in Rutana and Ngozi were reporting large early turnout. While in most other provinces, voting got off to a relatively slow start. As of the time of drafting we are still compiling reports, so we do not have definitive in many provinces.
- Elections observation was spotty, after boycotts by many local and international observer bodies. The the UN's MENUB and East African Community observers were deployed in several population areas. I understand that the independent Amizero y'aburundi movement and UPRONA party have fielded a few observers, though not many. There have been several complaints of polling stations opening late in some areas, suspicions triggered by last-minute changes in polling staff, and other isolated, relatively minor incidents.

Political Crisis. The elections took place against the backdrop of a broader political crisis that has led to an estimated 100 deaths, more than a hundred thousand displaced, and a deep political impasse. On April 25th, the ruling CNDD-FDD nominated President Pierre Nkurunziza to run for a third term in office. His nomination triggered protests from civil society groups and opposition parties, who argued that a third term was unconstitutional and violated the Arusha Agreements, the initial peace deal that laid the groundwork for an end to Burundi's civil war. While the Constitutional Court upheld Nkurunziza's candidacy and noted that the Constitution's language was vaguer than the Arusha Agreement, protests intensified against the candidacy and electoral process.

Regional mediation efforts were disrupted by an attempted coup on May 13 which, though quickly put down, saw serious fighting in Bujumbura, the destruction and shuttering of many of the principal independent news media outlets, and a grave escalation to political crisis. The impasse has persisted, opposition groups have boycotted the electoral process, several UN-brokered dialogue processes have broken down and the most recent regional mediation attempt, led by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has not yet yielded a solution. At the same time, violence erupted two weekends ago with apparent insurgents clashing with security forces in

northern Kayanza province, heavy firing was reported as recently as Monday night, and unconfirmed rumors of plots for armed struggle launched from outside the country continue.

Three Observations. I would like to make three general observations about the current conflict in Burundi, to help understand its causes and how its international partners, including the U.S., might best help to address it:

- 1. A Backdrop of Desperation.** The current crisis comes amidst some of the most crippling poverty on earth. A country the size of Maryland, Burundi is home to more than 10 million people, nearly all of whom depend on farming for their livelihoods. Even with its rich volcanic soil, small plot sizes barely yield enough food for many families. According to USAID-funded research in 2010, 45% of children under five are anemic, and NGOs report stunting rates of 57%. A 2010 analysis by the Food and Agricultural Organization noted that in some parts of northern Burundi, the average smallholder farm could feed a family of five for just two or three months out of the year – the remaining nine months they were left to their own devices.

In this context of rural desperation, it is no surprise that Burundi has had the third-highest rate of urbanization in the world, after only Qatar and its northern neighbor Rwanda. Many of the recent migrants to cities have been young, poor, with little hope for a better future. The future for young Burundians is even more challenging: projections by researchers the International Food Policy Research Institute, show that even under “optimistic” scenarios, childhood malnutrition will drop from 45% today to just under 40% by 2050.

It is inconceivable that a 40% malnutrition rate in one of the poorest nations, rapidly urbanizing countries on the planet can persist for the next 35 years without further political crises. The current crisis is occurring against the backdrop of fundamentally broken mathematics. Without support to efforts at regional integration and a growth in non-farm income, it is difficult to imagine long-term peace and stability.

- 2. What is at stake?** The debate around the current political crisis in Burundi has focused on the Arusha Agreements, which were signed 15 years ago, next month. The Arusha agreements set out a path to end the country’s civil war, and laid the bedrock for the new political order. The postwar political order has been based upon the principles of dialogue, political inclusivity, and guarantees that Burundi could be the home of all Burundians, regardless of ethnicity, region, or politics. While the Constitution laid the groundwork for governing the country, the principles enshrined in Arusha reflect a broader social compact – similar to the Magna Carta in Great Britain or the Declaration of Independence here in the U.S. In that way, it has become more than the text itself, a reflection of the will of the Burundian people to move beyond winner-takes-all politics and exclusionist rule.

It is because of that social compact that more than ten thousand families – many of whom did not even have enough land to feed themselves – accepted to share their land with returning refugees, in the service of the broader process of peace in the country. The reintegration of nearly 400,000 returning refugees into a land-poor and chronically malnourished country is a testament to the heroism of ordinary Burundians who sacrificed for peace. Within this

context, Burundi developed one of the most vibrant environments for media and public discourse about ethnicity, politics, and the legacy of the war.

The fundamental question that the current crisis poses to all of Burundi's leaders, as well as their international partners, is less about who will make up the next government of Burundi, but whether the social compact that values the spirit of dialogue, national unity, and vibrant inclusive discourse that accompanied the end of the war can be preserved following the polarization that has come with the electoral crisis. It is that fundamental social compact that must be preserved and enshrined within the post-electoral system.

- 3. What this crisis is not.** While thus far I have focused on what this crisis is, it is equally important to recognize what the crisis is not. The loss of life, the suffering of the displaced, and the anger and fear on display throughout the political crisis are unconscionable tragedies. At the same time, when I began learning about Burundi a decade ago, it would have been unthinkable that you would have a profound political crisis, urban demonstrations, and a coup attempt – and yet the crisis has not yet taken on the ethnic undertones that many had feared. When there was a coup attempt, the army remained largely unified in rejecting it, and throughout the crisis has been widely viewed as professional and apolitical.

The lesson that I draw from this is that “you get what you pay for.” Burundian leaders and ordinary citizens devoted time, money, and self-sacrifice to ensuring that army integration was successful. Courageous men and women across Burundi, often with support from religious and community leaders, chose to put ethnicity behind them as a dividing line, and that remains as a bulwark for peace today. Army reform efforts were supported by a range of international partners, including the U.S., and Burundian-led interethnic reconciliation efforts, were also a focus of international assistance, including through people-to-people Conflict Management and Mitigation programs.

The fact that ethnic identity and the army have not been manipulated into driving violence in the current crisis on a large scale is first and foremost a testament to the courage and strength of the Burundian people to put the crisis behind them. Secondly, it is a testament to the effectiveness of international support, without which the current crisis would very plausibly have been worse. At the same time, many of the current drivers to the crisis were specifically those that did not receive as much attention. There has been little sustained support to democratic governance and institution-building in the country, and little focus on the media sector as a whole. There has been little effort to meet the growing aspirations of a poor, and increasingly urban, youth population. The specific areas where there was not sustained attention have been those that have featured prominently.

Responding to the Current Crisis. While many observers focused on the risk of violence during the electoral process as the principle threat to peace and stability in the country, we see a need for continued US diplomatic and programmatic engagement over the years to come.

Short-Term. In the immediate post-electoral context, confidence-building measures will be critical to shore up the social compact. The appointment of Tom Perriello as Great Lakes Special Envoy represents a key opportunity for the United States to work closely with Burundi's neighbors to play a positive role and to continue to support regional efforts to broker a

consensual solution to the ongoing crisis. While deep differences remain, as far as I can see, progress on several “low hanging fruits” can help build confidence from the different political actors. This includes the African Union offer of human rights observers to document the situation in the country, working with national leaders. The continued absence of news media that have been damaged and suspended since the coup crisis has created an opportunity for rumors and misinformation to flourish. While all sides have committed to seeing these media reopened, there is significant divergence on the legal process for reopening the stations; progress to ensuring greater access to information and public debate, while maintaining safeguards against hate speech, could be instrumental in decreasing tension.

Medium Term. The degree to which democratic dialogue continues after the elections, and to which the new government is inclusive of different political tendencies, and able to preserve a vibrant political debate will be critical to preserving the long-term social compact that has guided the country’s long-term process of peace consolidation.

In that context, several key institutions will be critical, and likely to handle some of the most contentious issues. That includes the National Human Rights Commission, which appears to be the most likely body to address complaints emerging from the violence that we have seen over the past months. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established just before the electoral process, will be responsible for handling the contentious legacy of conflict in Burundi, and can go a long way towards addressing the legacy of a contentious past. Finally, the Land Commission, the CNTB, handles some of the most challenging and contentious cases. It was suspended several months ago, due to localized protests against its decisions, and the degree to which it can maintain the confidence of ordinary Burundians across the country to handle disputes transparently will be viewed by many at the grassroots level as a bellwether for the sustained commitment to addressing and resolving divisive issues in a consensual manner.

Long Term. As I said earlier, the underlying mathematics of the crisis in Burundi do not work, and it is difficult to imagine consolidating long-term peace without sustained commitment to international support and engagement. Even as we respond to the latest crisis, we need to address some of the underlying structural dynamics. Improving food security, and increasing opportunities for non-farm income are critical Burundi’s long-term future. The latter of these challenges hinges on improved investments in an educational sector that gives Burundian students both technical knowledge and social skills to compete in a regional and global economy, support to regional integration, and improved economic governance. Additionally, Regional bodies, including the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Region, the Lake Tanganyika Authority, and the Ruzizi Power Pool, among others, can unlock opportunities for growth.

Finally, while the U.S. is rightfully focused on the current electoral crisis in the country, attention has waxed and waned over the years, lurching from crisis to crisis. Even as U.S. recalls the commitments that Burundians made in Arusha, it is not clear to me that the accompaniment by the United States was what we would have imagined when Bill Clinton went to Arusha to observe the signing 15 years ago. While policymakers are rightly concerned about the state of democratic governance in Burundi today, we have to recognize that for the last five years, the budget for Democratic Governance programming in the country was zero. Sustained diplomatic and development engagement is necessary to support the longer process of consolidating long-term peace in Burundi and supporting resiliency to chronic crises.