



American Friends Service Committee

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**Statement by
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**Testimony before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations**

**Hearing: The Unfolding Crisis in Burundi
July 22, 2015**

The American Friends Service Committee thanks Chairman Chris Smith, Ranking Member Karen Bass and the distinguished members of this subcommittee for holding this important hearing today.

The American Friends Service Committee is a Quaker organization working in 56 locations throughout the world, promoting lasting peace with justice as a practical expression of faith in action. Founded in 1917, AFSC has worked throughout the world in conflict zones, in areas affected by natural disasters, and in oppressed communities to address the root causes of war and violence; AFSC was co-awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this work in 1947 on behalf of all Friends. AFSC has sought to address a wide range of challenges impacting countries in Africa for over 50 years - supporting efforts to end Apartheid in South Africa, healing the wounds of war in Mozambique, and establishing sustainable livelihoods for youth in Somalia, among many other initiatives. Today AFSC works in four countries in Africa - Zimbabwe, Somalia, Kenya and Burundi - and demonstrates the power of every community to solve its own problems creatively and nonviolently.

The Crisis Unfolding in Burundi

Emerging from a brutal civil war at the turn of the millennium Burundi has largely been hailed as a peacebuilding success story in the fifteen years since the Arusha Peace Agreement was signed. A deep citizen commitment to restoring broken bonds throughout society has helped bring the country forward, and nationwide reconciliation processes were beginning to take shape.

In recent months, disagreements among political actors over differing interpretations of the mandate of the President under the Arusha Peace Agreement and the national constitution have strained the fragile peace to which all actors have contributed in Burundi. The ruling party asserts that the current President has been in office for just one term through universal suffrage, while the opposition asserts that he has been in office for two terms. According to the opposition, another term in office would violate the Arusha Peace Agreement and constitution.

This disagreement has sparked a series of demonstrations since the 26th of April 2015 as reported in the international media. In the intervening period, over 140,000 people have fled the country,

according to the UNHCR. They have fled due to violence, the fear of violence, and/or concern that they won't be able to provide for their families due to Burundi's flagging economy. As tensions have flared in this country where memories of civil war remain fresh, reports show that many have died from the violence, many others have been injured and there have been a substantive number of detentions.

The international community has responded to these developments in a number of ways, including the offer of mediators for a dialogue process. Unfortunately, two different mediators have been dismissed by the political dialogue's stakeholders, and the process has yet to yield a comprehensive agreement. There was an increase of violence in the wake of the parliamentary elections held on June 29th and there are concerns about what will happen in the post-electoral period after scheduled presidential elections this week.

AFSC's Work in Burundi

For over a decade, AFSC has carried out programs in Burundi on peacebuilding and conflict prevention, including initiatives to support community livelihoods, trauma healing, and national reconciliation. We have worked with women's associations, youth associations and others with a deep commitment to Burundi. We have also worked in partnership with Quakers in Burundi who, over the last 20 years, have developed a reputation for undertaking effective initiatives in community healing, community reconciliation and violence prevention. Rooted in the Quaker belief that there is that of God in every person, we have brought people together across lines of identity – ethnicity, religion, gender, and experience during war - to heal and restore bonds of community.

AFSC's work has engaged key actors at both the community and socio-political level. Our initial work at the socio-political level has led to an environment where we are able to organize dialogue and exchange programs that bring Burundian actors together with those from other countries in the global South. These programs focus on a number of different issues such as truth and reconciliation commission design and implementation, preventing election violence, etc. These programs have shown us the constructive opportunities that exist for working with national actors on issues that are critical to peace and nation-building.

The work we have done in Burundi has yielded strong examples of communities resolving their differences through inclusive dialogue and increasing self-reliance through community livelihood approaches. We have seen measurable success in the difficult, long-term work of reknitting a more healthy social and economic fabric within this nation in the wake of serious conflicts and challenges. These results have informed our understanding of the power of Burundian organizations and government institutions working at the community and socio-political levels.

In the current crisis, AFSC has supported religious leadership who wanted to work on peacebuilding activities. Before being a political being, everyone is a believer who belongs to a faith community that has some influence in their life. The important role of the faith community has also been recognized by Search for Common Ground, which has worked with faith leaders and with whom we partnered at the early stage of this program.

AFSC is supporting the Evangelical Friends Church of Burundi on an emergency response project which has brought together leadership from different faith communities to envision what they could do to support peace. At the local level, pastors, imams and priests are encouraging actions toward peace in congregations around the country, which include a diverse array of communities and political backgrounds. They are distributing messages of peace and encouraging dialogue with their members during both ecumenical services and out of church encounters. At the national level they have chosen a small committee of representatives from religious bodies to reach out to different socio-political

actors working to advocate for peace and dialogue. It is hoped that through this emergency project, Burundians will agree to put aside their differences and work for the common good of the country.

Based on our work, we hope that the U.S. and international community engages government or political level actors as well as groups at the community level in efforts to forge durable peace, both now and into the future.

Recommendations for the USG and International Community

Others testifying today will discuss the issue of the third term, which certainly sparked the current crisis. However, our decade of experience working in this context leads us to urge the U.S. government to also focus on additional actions to diffuse the immediate crisis, and create a strategy for long-term engagement that supports the conditions necessary for sustainable peace.

Revitalize the Mediation Process

Revitalizing the mediation process should be a top priority for the U.S. and other governments in order to help Burundi move past this crisis. The international community needs to collaborate on a process with trust-building mechanisms that will enable actors to stay engaged and support complementary efforts for peace which are taking place in Burundian society. We welcome the appointment of the new U.S. Special Envoy for the Great Lakes, Tom Perriello. We hope that he will be able to support increased coherence within the mediation process by coordinating with the mediation team, East African Community (EAC), African Union (AU) and others working to support an end to the crisis. In the end, however, success depends on Burundian parties themselves being led by a spirit of concern for the well-being of the country and committing to good faith participation in the process.

The peace that has existed for a decade in Burundi has been based upon a conscious choice among the majority of Burundians to work toward reconciliation at individual and community levels. It is essential that these advocates for reconciliation are recognized and included in conversations about Burundi's future as much as those in conflict over what shape it should take. It is important to begin that engagement process now. We hope this is something the U.S. can support.

A range of Burundian organizations outside the political milieu have been working to support peace and good governance issues since the Arusha Peace Agreement. These impartial civil society organizations should be included in the mediation and post mediation planning processes, so that these processes benefit from their long-term experience and work on the issues underlying and beyond the current crisis. Involvement of these organizations will help produce results that benefit Burundian citizens and make the processes more accountable to them. It will also strengthen transparency and credibility. The shape or form of civil society participation in the mediation process should be negotiated with all actors to ensure that their ideas have a voice balanced appropriately with the role of political actors.

Burundian organizations that could play a supportive role in the current mediation process include those that have worked on trust building with a spectrum of groups including multiple political parties, the army, the police, ex-combatants, civil society and local leaders who are not politicians. The mediation team should consult Burundian organizations such as those that were involved with the work of Howard Wolpe, former U.S. Special Envoy to the Africa Great Lakes region, since they could bring institutional knowledge to the process based on their experiences after the Arusha Peace Agreement.

Depending on the nature of the mediation as it develops and what it covers, there will be a need to ensure that the perspectives of the Burundian public are also taken into consideration. This may necessitate complementary processes. Some issues that have come up during the crisis need to be separated from the major negotiation process, such as the revitalization of independent media.

Invest in Long-term Strategies

Long-term Strategies Not Flashpoint Prevention

The Atrocity Prevention Board's focus on Burundi, beginning over a year ago, is to be commended for ensuring U.S. government attention to conflict prevention. But the trends in approach and funding for prevention and peacebuilding need to move toward long-term strategies that recognize the cyclical, iterative nature of peacebuilding.

Burundi and other post-conflict countries traditionally receive little funding for peacebuilding and development in the years between elections. Too often, funding and programming are focused on the short period before a potential flashpoint. However, long term sustainable progress happens in the daily work that takes place over significantly longer periods of time. Support for a sustained and durable peace in Burundi will take dedicated time and investment beyond the immediate crisis. The need for such a strategy only intensifies if broader violence ensues during this period.

Burundian organizations with deep community experience can play an important role in generating ideas to advance and support long-term international community peacebuilding and development strategies, as they have in the past. In 2006, organizations instituted a process to generate ideas for Burundi's official collaboration with the UN peacebuilding structures (Peacebuilding Commission, Peacebuilding Support Office and the Peacebuilding Fund). These organizations put aside any political differences to develop suggestions for the years ahead, which were submitted to the government and subsequently included in official peacebuilding and development processes of the country.

U.S. investment in Burundi will find many willing partners for longer term engagement. The processes and institutions that create conditions for peace don't make the news the way those building toward conflict do; however, there are organizations throughout Burundi that have done incredible work to build social cohesion over time. They are the livelihoods organizations, like those that have put together micro-lending programs and savings circles that support groups with Hutu, Tutsi, Twa, returnees, ex-combatants, IDPs and women participants. They are the groups of young people coming together from across political party affiliations to create a better economic future for themselves. They are the religious leaders currently appealing for peace, helping to dispel rumors at the local level and keeping communities unified in working toward peaceful coexistence.

Funding for Democracy, Rights & Governance

AFSC does not accept USG funds for international work. However, we do track USG expenditures on the issues we care about. We note that there have been drastic cuts to core U.S. accounts that support democracy, rights and governance programs over the past few years. These cuts have directly impacted U.S. capacities to support long-term work needed to avert this and other crises.

Investing early to prevent conflicts from escalating into violent crises is, on average, *60 times* more cost effective than intervening after violence erupts, according to research from the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict. The current funding patterns for democracy, rights and governance ensure minimal availability of funds and no sustained funding beyond immediate crisis points. If we continue these funding levels and continue to provide military assistance to Burundi at much, much higher levels, what message are we sending to the people of Burundi? Congress needs to increase funding for democracy, rights, governance and peacebuilding accounts. It also

needs to signal to the Administration that it supports long-term investment for post-conflict countries, rather than continuing limited support around potential flashpoints.

Maintenance of Crisis Prevention and Response Accounts

There have also been challenges to funding more short term conflict prevention accounts. For FY2016, for the second year in a row, the House voted not to allocate any money for the Complex Crisis Fund (CCF). This account is currently funding violence prevention programs with youth in Burundi that are an important component in the APB's prevention efforts. The Senate has passed a version of the budget with \$30M for CCF in total, for all its efforts across the globe.

U.S. Diplomatic Leadership

The U.S. embassy in Burundi has a small staff that is working diligently but they will need more colleagues if we ask them to increase activities. Additionally, as international support moves forward for Burundi, international donors will need to increase efforts to spend time outside Bujumbura to monitor and make necessary changes to their strategy of engagement. These trips will be important to ensure effectiveness and attenuate perceptions that the international community bases its ideas on the opinions of the cosmopolitan elite.

We hope that during the crisis, the U.S. embassy remains open to be able to engage in diplomatic activities. It is worth noting that, in general, the ability of U.S. diplomats and USAID staff to engage local communities in the post-Benghazi environment is very challenging. We urge Congress to weigh in on this issue with State Department Diplomatic Security to help clear the way for our vanguard of diplomacy and development to significantly engage with the communities where they are based.

Take a Regional Approach

The history of the Great Lakes region includes a range of significant conflicts that have spilled from one country to another. It also includes dynamics where countries have provided support or safe harbor to armed groups from their neighbors. There have been instances in the current crisis where either individuals or groups have expressed the desire to use force to take power. Nothing can be as important as fostering dialogue and working against violence, which would have repercussions for both Burundi and the entire region. We urge the U.S. to use its good offices with all of Burundi's neighbors to promote a setting where each country supports peace processes and refrains from getting involved in armed activities of any kind, within or across borders.

We also encourage the U.S. to remain committed to participation in regional approaches for coordination of diplomatic rapid response that could be helpful, particularly if violence breaks out. We hope that the U.S. collaboration with the EAC, AU, UN and others includes standing ready to respond with rapid and high-level diplomatic engagement in case of heightened violence.

Conclusion

The future of Burundi lies in the hands of Burundians – but the international community can provide important support for positive developments. Progress can be made if we invest in Burundi and make an effort to support the work of those committed to peace and development by engaging in the following activities:

Revitalize the mediation process in order to help Burundi move past this crisis

- The international community needs to collaborate on a process with trust-building mechanisms that will enable actors to stay engaged and support complementary efforts for peace which are taking place in Burundian society.
- Trusted Burundian organizations that have been working to support peace and good governance should be included in the mediation and post mediation planning processes, so that these processes might benefit from their long-term experience and work on the issues underlying and beyond the current crisis.

Create a strategy for long term engagement with Burundi that recognizes sustainable and durable peace and development will take dedicated time and investment beyond the immediate crisis

- Congress should increase funding for the core U.S. accounts that support democracy, rights and governance programs, which have been cut in recent years and now face further cuts. It should also signal to the Administration that investment needs to be made in long-term support to post-conflict countries, rather than continuing a limited focus on short term flashpoints.

Take a regional approach to the crisis that recognizes both potential spoilers and diplomatic rapid response

- The U.S. needs to use its good offices with all of Burundi's neighbors to ask them to support peace processes and refrain from getting involved in armed activities of any kind, within or across borders.
- The U.S. must remain committed to participation in regional diplomatic initiatives and stand ready to respond with rapid and high-level diplomatic engagement in case of heightened violence.

AFSC and Friends organizations from Kenya to Norway released a joint statement asking all Burundian actors to work for peace. AFSC commends the efforts of members of Burundian society and the international community who have ceaselessly supported peace in these difficult moments. We ask that you join us in continuing to hold Burundi in the Light.

There is rarely an "arrival" in peacebuilding processes – there are cycles that include ongoing challenges and opportunities for breakthrough. At this time Burundi once again faces a stark choice between re-igniting conflict or recommitting to the hard work of building and maintaining a sustainable peace. Regional actors, the U.S., and the global community at large must do all we can at this time to support the conditions for the latter option to win the day.

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to speak with the Committee today.