

Testimony  
“Africa’s Great Lakes Region: A Security, Political, and Humanitarian Challenge”  
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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and members of the Committee: Thank you for the invitation to testify today on the many challenges facing the African Great Lakes region, and our comprehensive efforts to support a durable peace, strong democratic institutions, and shared prosperity, including through upcoming elections across the region. I am honored both to be back on Capitol Hill and to be asked to testify today with Assistant Secretary Thomas-Greenfield.

As the Assistant Secretary has outlined, the Great Lakes region has experienced a generation of tumult, but over the last couple of decades it has benefited from bipartisan support on Capitol Hill that has not gone unnoticed by the people of the region. Even in today’s political climate, we see and greatly appreciate the broad support for our engagement, our programs, and our embassies in the region.

After decades of instability with devastating human consequences, the next two years will determine much about the Great Lakes region’s future. Whereas in past years the story of the Great Lakes was one of active conflict, we have seen significant gains towards peace and stability in the region. While we continue to address armed groups, particularly in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), our attention is focused acutely at this time on related, underlying challenges: the establishment of strong institutions of governance and harnessing the power of democratic voices in order to ensure that the people of the region are empowered to determine their countries’ futures.

In this regard, we are putting intense diplomatic efforts behind support for upcoming elections in the Republic of Congo, the DRC, Rwanda, and Uganda, as well as addressing the violent, destabilizing aftermath of Burundi’s recent decision to proceed with what the African Union called “non-consensual, non-inclusive elections.” The run-up to these elections – particularly with respect to leaders’ decisions to respect constitutional term limits and governments’ decisions to protect open democratic space, even for peaceful dissent – will determine much about whether the region reaps the benefits of two decades of investment in peace, democracy, and development, or trades in those hard-fought gains for the consolidation of power. It is for this reason that I will devote my testimony today

to these upcoming elections, our efforts to support them and the efforts of more than 125 million citizens resident in the region who are demanding a voice in shaping brighter futures for their countries.

We know what could happen in the Great Lakes if these next elections are perceived as unfair, if leaders do everything they can to cling to power, and if citizens' voices are silenced. Sadly, the current crisis in Burundi demonstrates with stark clarity the human costs if leaders in the region attempt to change the rules to stay in power. The bleak situation President Nkurunziza faces should serve as a cautionary tale, not a playbook, for other leaders in the region. If the same situation unfolds in the DRC over the next year, the costs in terms of human life, economic well-being, and regional stability would be far greater. It is first and foremost the responsibility of these governments and their citizens to do the right thing – for presidents to respect constitutional term limits, for security forces to respect the rule of law and democratic freedoms, and for citizens to exercise their rights peacefully. But it is also our responsibility to support them and to help ensure that this pivotal period in Great Lakes history becomes the prelude to a new chapter of peace and shared prosperity, rather than a violent sequel of past instability and setbacks. The people in the region – with bipartisan support from the United States – have invested too much not to see the Great lakes through this promising though daunting period of transition.

## **Burundi**

### **Political and Security Crisis**

The political and security crisis in Burundi is a prime example of what happens when an individual clings to power at the expense of his country and people. President Pierre Nkurunziza's decision to stand for a third term and violate the Arusha Agreement, which led to the end of Burundi's deadly civil war and provided the foundation for a decade of progress, served as the precursor to this now complex and dire crisis. This focus of blame was recently confirmed in the African Union Peace and Security Council's October 17 communique. Months of government suppression of protestors, a failed coup attempt in May, which we strongly condemned, discredited elections held over the summer, tit-for-tat assassinations, and an increasingly dire humanitarian situation have turned Burundi into a pressure cooker that could burst any day.

Open political space has been all but eliminated in Burundi. The government's deliberate efforts over the past year to silence dissent through harsh crackdowns on

political protests, closing of independent media, and intimidation of the judiciary and civil society have resulted in an environment where few feel free to speak up and those who do are often forced to flee the country. A member of Burundi's Constitutional Court fled the country in May after coming under enormous pressure and even death threats to rubber-stamp Nkurunziza's disputed candidacy. The country's former Second Vice President similarly fled the country in June after receiving death threats in the wake of his public opposition to Nkurunziza's third term. The climate of fear in Burundi has only become worse since the elections. Media outlets forced by the government to close in the run-up to elections have yet to reopen, and most independent journalists have fled the country under threat. Nkurunziza's has made clear that any individual who speaks out against the government or opposes the government's actions will be considered an enemy of the state.

The Burundian people are paying the heaviest toll for the government's overreach. More than 200,000 people have already fled Burundi, with more leaving every day. In my recent travels to the region, I met with Burundian refugees in Rwanda and in Tanzania. I heard harrowing stories of Burundians who were attacked by youth militia, women who were raped, and of families left behind. The refugees showing up in camps now are weaker, more malnourished and traumatized, and their willingness to risk everything to flee proves how harrowing the situation has become inside Burundi.

For those who do stay in Burundi, daily violence and assassinations have become the norm. We receive reports of dead bodies found in and outside the capital on a daily basis, many under conditions suggesting the individuals were targeted for political retribution. The assassination of General Adolphe Nshimirimana, the brutal assassination attempt on human rights activist Pierre Claver Mbonimpa and the fatal attack on his son-in-law, and the attempted assassination of Burundian military Chief of Staff General Prime Niyongabo are indicative of the ongoing violence. The next attack could unleash wider-spread violence.

Much of the daily, or more often nightly, violence is reportedly carried out by state security services, as well as at the hands of the *Imbonerakure*, the armed wing of the ruling party's youth militia. Reports of harassment, torture, and killings by the *Imbonerakure* go back months, with recent reports suggesting that the youth militia is being more widely used by the government to carry out targeted attacks. Despite repeated calls by the international community, neither the senior government leaders who control and orchestrate *Imbonerakure* violence nor members of the *Imbonerakure* themselves have been held accountable for any of the attacks

allegedly carried out by this group. However, we also have credible reports that attacks have been carried out against Burundian security services, including police officers, by groups reportedly aligned with different political parties or in retaliation for attacks by police. The instability caused by this cycle of attacks, and widespread reports of groups arming in the countryside, demonstrates the real risk of devolution to a low-level civil war or effectively a failed state with pockets of ungoverned space. Reports that refugees are being recruited and armed by regional actors only compound the problem. Any effort to undermine Burundi's stability and democracy is condemnable and must stop immediately.

Perhaps the most pressing issue in Burundi right now is the dire economic situation. Put simply, Burundi's economy is in free fall. The Burundian government is struggling to pay salaries and its bills. Recent developments have crippled an already fragile economy, causing prices to spike in a country where the majority of the population lives on less than a dollar a day. A tipping point for the country could be when the government runs out of cash on hand, which may be only a couple months away.

### Regional Dynamics

The crisis in Burundi, like any in the Great Lakes region, proceeds not in a vacuum, but within the context of important broader regional dynamics. As a general rule, the United States strongly supports regional leadership in resolving political and security crises. The region has the expertise, leadership, influence, and motivation to be the most effective in resolving a crisis within its own neighborhood. With Burundi, we note the engagement of the East African Community (EAC), the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), the African Union (AU), and even the United Nations (UN). While we continue to work with and support our regional partners, we are concerned that some regional dynamics may be impeding progress in this case.

Many in the region who, like Nkurunziza, are testing the fortitude of their country's term limit provisions, are watching Burundi in hopes that it helps set a precedent for individuals remaining in power. The governments of the Republic of Congo and Rwanda are already making moves to amend their constitutions, while senior political figures in the DRC have indicated an interest in doing so.

Others in the region, often those supporting the Burundian government, argue that our focus on term limits comes at the expense of stability. We argue quite the opposite – support for regular, democratic transitions of power is in the best

interest of a country's stability. Burundi is a prime example of the instability that comes when a president tries to stay in power at the expense of his country. It is naïve to believe that violating term limits in other countries will be met with drastically different results than it has in Burundi.

These same dynamics are exacerbated by the arguments from some in the region that the Arusha Agreement should not be considered sacrosanct. The Arusha Agreement contains no ambiguity about limiting presidential mandates, so it is not a complete surprise that those backing Nkurunziza are downplaying the immutability of Arusha. Given Arusha's critical role in ending the civil war, its strong influence of the subsequent constitution, and its continued prominence in Burundi over the past decade, we believe its preservation is paramount as stakeholders work to resolve this crisis.

There are also broader geo-political dynamics at play in Burundi. There are reports that Burundian opposition figures are residing in Rwanda and receiving support from the government there. This is increasing regional tension as countries side with Burundi because of their opposition to perceived Rwandan involvement. This type of tension is not new to the region; indeed, historic geo-political fault lines that go back at least to the Congo wars risk being revived today. There are increased indications that the EAC is divided along these predictable fault lines, preventing a consensus on moving forward. It is imperative that the EAC, in coordination with the AU and the UN, reach consensus and urgently move forward to resolve this crisis, and restore stability and cooperation to the region. In this regard, we were heartened to see strong leadership by the AU just last weekend, when the Peace and Security Council in a strongly-worded communique called for targeted sanctions against Burundian actors undermining the search for peace, an increase in military and human rights observers in Burundi, robust contingency planning for increased violence, and most urgently, the resumption of an inclusive dialogue amongst all Burundian stakeholders to be held outside of the country.

### Need for Dialogue

Indeed, we believe that this type of inclusive, immediate, and internationally-mediated dialogue among Burundian stakeholders is the best route to a consensus path forward for the country and regional stability. To ensure that all peaceful parties participate and feel safe, we support the dialogue being convened outside of Burundi and with an African mediator. The EAC has long agreed on the need for dialogue, having appointed Ugandan President Museveni back in July to facilitate it. President Museveni has since repeatedly affirmed his intention to convene the

dialogue, and the AU last weekend put its support behind Museveni's continued leadership. While we support President Museveni, and his regional mandate as facilitator, we have been frustrated by the failure of such talks to begin and believe the people of Burundi cannot afford further delays in resolving this crisis.

The Burundian government and opposition parties rejected two previous UN envoys sent to Burundi to help mediate dialogue prior to this summer's elections. This dynamic, coupled with the prospect that any dialogue may fail in the end to achieve peace, may be contributing to the delay in the launch of the dialogue. If President Museveni and the EAC prefer, we would support the AU assuming facilitation, in order to jump-start the process. Also, while we support the dialogue being convened in Uganda, we would similarly support the region accepting the AU's offer for the dialogue to be convened in Addis Ababa at their headquarters. The scarce resource here is time. We fear the window is closing for restarting a dialogue in time to prevent wider-spread violence.

Once a dialogue is initiated, we can work with the region to build the necessary infrastructure around it. The international team of envoys is available to support and observe the talks, and we have worked with regional bodies thus far to find a path forward. The right participants can be worked out through initial discussions, including the right leaders to represent the array of peaceful opposition parties. The issue of term limits will need to be addressed, but should not be the first or only item on the agenda. We do not want the most challenging factors to hold up the dialogue or prevent resolution of other topics, including reopening the media, releasing political prisoners, and disarming youth militias. Opposition leaders have told me they are prepared to begin talks immediately without pre-conditions. The Government of Burundi has told us that it supports an internal dialogue under its conditions, but, under increasing pressure from the recent AU communique, has recently indicated that it too is open to an international dialogue. Again, the imperative here is time. The onus is on the region to urgently convene the dialogue, and on the Nkurunziza regime and the Burundian opposition to come to the table in good faith.

### Next Steps

Regarding our next steps, first and foremost, we are pursuing all available diplomatic tools to convince stakeholders in Burundi, the region, and the international community to resume immediate, inclusive, regionally-mediated talks to end this crisis. I just returned from the region where I met with members of the Burundian government, civil society, and opposition members. Our Ambassador

and her team in Bujumbura are doing an outstanding job with limited personnel and under very difficult circumstances. We must maintain lines of communication with the government as we encourage them to do the right thing. We must also continue to engage civil society and the opposition to convince them that peaceful avenues to resolve this crisis remain imminent and viable.

Similarly, we will continue to engage with all the regional stakeholders, as we cannot resolve Burundi on our own, nor should we. The AU and the EAC must retain the lead in resolving this crisis, and we will continue to support their efforts to convene a dialogue, respond to the mounting humanitarian crisis, and undertake contingency planning.

We have already significantly curtailed our security assistance to the Burundian government, including International Law Enforcement Academy and Anti-Terrorism Assistance training that we provide to Burundian law enforcement agencies, in-country training for the Burundian military under the Department of Defense's Section 2282 Train and Equip program, which has helped prepare Burundian peacekeepers for missions in Somalia and the Central African Republic (CAR), and training and assistance under the Africa Military Education Program. Our remaining assistance is primarily going to International Military Education and Training activities, which help increase the Burundian military's understanding and acceptance of civilian control of the military, human rights, military justice, and management of defense resources. While we strongly support the peacekeeping missions in Somalia and CAR, our support for Burundi's participation could be cut if the government continues down its current path. All non-life saving assistance and the country's eligibility for African Growth and Opportunity Act benefits are on the table.

We support the EU's recent decision to impose sanctions and hold accountable those whose actions it has determined have led to acts of unlawful violence, repression, and serious human rights abuses in Burundi. We strongly support the AU's decision to pursue sanctions as well. We have repeatedly called for accountability in Burundi and will continue to support measures aimed at doing so. There should be consequences for those who blatantly destabilize a country. The EU has also begun Article 96 proceedings, which could lead to the suspension of the EU's remaining assistance.

Lastly, we continue to undertake contingency planning for the possibility of more widespread violence in Burundi and support additional efforts by the AU in this regard. The Atrocities Prevention Board (APB) has been actively seized with

Burundi for over a year now. The State Department, DOD, and USAID are working closely with the White House to ensure that we are prepared to respond to changing conditions on the ground. We will do everything we can to support the people of Burundi and prevent mass atrocities.

## **The DRC**

### **The Stakes**

If Burundi demonstrates the costs of a country choosing the wrong path, the DRC is at the crossroads, still within sight of the right course. DRC's presidential election is currently scheduled for November 2016, providing an opportunity for the first peaceful democratic transfer between elected leaders in the DRC's history. It is essential that the DRC government avoid the path taken by Burundi and use this next year to implement a plan for peaceful, credible, and on-time elections in line with the constitution.

The stakes are enormous. Good elections would bolster the DRC's fragile democratic progress, continued stabilization across the country, the confidence of investors, and momentum towards greater development and prosperity. Alternatively, a failed, delayed, or illegitimate election could set off violence and repression on a much larger scale than we have seen in Burundi. In a worst-case scenario, the size of the country, the sheer lack of infrastructure, particularly in remote provinces, the litany of arms available, the continued predations of armed groups, and the history of violent conflict could make DRC ripe for widespread instability and atrocities if the government resorts to repressive tactics to remain in power. Such instability would almost certainly reverse the security gains, economic growth, and political reform achieved in recent years. It could also have dangerous repercussions for the region, expanding already high refugee flows on overburdened neighbors and leaving cross-border armed groups unchecked.

We remain hopeful that President Kabila will do the right thing and ensure that his country undertakes national elections in November 2016 within constitutional parameters. He has made no declarative statement that he intends to do otherwise. However, the government has taken a number of troubling steps, which threaten a constitutional electoral calendar and are widely perceived as means to extend the President's hold on power.

The DRC constitution's term limit provision is unambiguous. A president may serve two, and only two, consecutive terms in office, and this provision cannot be



amended without voiding the entire constitution. Any effort to overcome the term limit or delay elections certainly will be met with a strong reaction from the people of the DRC, as earlier efforts have demonstrated. I met many of them during recent trips to the Congo, and it was clear that there is massive, widespread support for a free and fair democratic transition and for protecting the constitution. Indeed, giving voice to the Congolese people to freely choose their leaders is the fundamental bedrock of our policy in the DRC.

An attempt by President Kabila's political supporters in 2014 to amend the constitution stalled due to disagreement within his political alliance. In January 2015, President Kabila's "Presidential Majority" coalition introduced electoral legislation requiring a nationwide census that would have significantly delayed elections past November 2016. Following widespread and violent protests around the country, the DRC Parliament removed the census language from the legislation that eventually passed. Earlier this year, President Kabila initiated a National Dialogue to address concerns about the viability of the current election plans, but failure to agree with any major opposition groups on the format and agenda has undermined efforts to create delays. Most recently, senior leaders in Parliament and the Congolese government have been dismissed or forced to resign following the publication of an open letter by a group of parties within the ruling coalition calling for constitutional term limits and timelines to be respected.

This dynamic political situation means that the current electoral calendar is already off track, and it includes multiple rounds that could be consolidated or scheduled for after the presidential election. While properly timed, credible local elections could go a long way in decentralizing power across the DRC and strengthening the country's governance, rushed local elections could have the opposite effect of locking in patronage networks and ethnic divisions. In my travels, I have found almost no support for rushing local elections, and broad support for prioritizing presidential, parliamentary, and provincial elections in one or no more than two cycles.

There are a number of technical challenges that also must be addressed to meet the constitutional calendar, most notably updating voting rolls to include the eight million voters who have come of age since 2011. This will also likely include cleaning up the existing voter files needed for any election to be credible.

The National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) recently became leaderless with the resignation of its president, Abbé Malu-Malu. A fully staffed and funded CENI is paramount to organizing good elections. It is unclear who will

replace the former President, but the independence and qualifications of the final candidate will be indicative of the government's seriousness in supporting on-time, credible elections.

Beyond the timing and logistics of elections, the most concerning trend by the DRC government has been the alarming escalation of political repression and intimidation, closing political space for the opposition, media, and political activists. Disturbing reports of extrajudicial killings and disappearances; curbs on freedom of speech, assembly and the press; use of excessive force against demonstrators; politically-motivated prosecutions and surveillance of activists and opposition leaders, are all of serious concern.

In view of this challenging electoral environment, it is all the more important to retain a robust and capable UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO). MONUSCO played a pivotal role in the 2006 and 2011 elections, providing technical support, air assets for moving ballots, and civilian security. MONUSCO's good offices, logistical support, monitoring capabilities, and technical capacity are all useful tools to help ensure a peaceful and credible electoral cycle.

### Next Steps for the DRC Government

The challenges outlined above are not insurmountable for the Congolese. There remains time for the government to organize credible, on-time elections next year, but the time for moving forward is now. Quite simply, DRC elections must be a 2015 priority issue to have a chance of being a 2016 reality. A 2016 election will only be possible if Congolese political leaders reach consensus on a number of steps over the next few months.

First, the DRC needs a revised and *realistic* electoral calendar, which prioritizes presidential, parliamentary, and provincial elections. Second, the government of the DRC and CENI should agree on a plan for disbursement of resources in support of the election cycle, and the government should promptly disburse the necessary funds. Third, the CENI must greenlight a process for updating existing voter rolls with urgency. Fourth, candidates, parties, and government officials should all make a pledge for nonviolence, with a paramount burden on the state to protect open democratic space.

Fifth, the DRC government should resume cooperation with MONUSCO. While the DRC has made significant democratic strides in the past 15 years, it has never

conducted elections without experiencing electoral-related violence. We will need a robust peacekeeping mission to help ensure stability and the protection of civilians during this period, and to provide good offices and logistical assistance to facilitate the electoral cycle. Cooperation between the mission and the government will be key to planning for and providing electoral security, and responding to outbreaks in violence.

### U.S. Next Steps

For our part, we will continue to engage the DRC government, CENI, opposition parties, and civil society members to support the upcoming elections and to maintain and reopen political space. Our goal is simple – let the voice of the Congolese people shape the country’s future. On my recent visits to the DRC, I have been greatly impressed by the expertise, activism, and commitment demonstrated by the Congolese civil society, citizenry, and opposition parties, as well as many government officials. Grassroots organization is strong in the DRC, as is public understanding of what is at stake for their country. We will continue to advocate for the opening of political space and for accountability for any who repress democratic voices or advocate violence.

We will also continue to work with our donor partners on public engagement and electoral support. Many donors are rightfully concerned about putting money towards these elections until the government shows more commitment to ensure a credible and on-time process. While we share these concerns, we believe immediate investment in updating of the voter rolls is a priority and has the largest potential for costly delays, if not initiated early. We are currently funding programs that support election observers, voter education, political party training, and technical support to the CENI, and have additional human rights and judicial programming in the pipeline. We will continue to look for such opportunities to help.

Given what is at stake with these next elections, we should not resist using every tool available to support this historic electoral cycle. The stage is set for President Kabila to make the right decision, for elections to be a success, and for the DRC to welcome in a new era of development and prosperity. But, Burundi serves as a warning of what can happen when a government chooses the wrong path.

## **Rwanda**

Rwanda's elections are not until 2017, but the government is already taking steps that would allow President Kagame to remain in office beyond current constitutional term limits. President Kagame and the Rwandan Parliament established a Constitutional Reform Commission (CRC), and the Rwandan Supreme Court ruled on October 8 that the current constitution permits reform of the term limits provision, provided certain steps are taken in line with the constitution. Proposed amendments to the Constitution were sent to Parliament for debate and consideration by the CRC on October 12. Our position here remains the same as in other countries in the region. While we respect the ability of any parliament to pass legislation that reflects the will of the people, we continue to firmly support the principle of democratic transition of power in all countries through free, fair, and credible elections, held in accordance with constitutions, including existing term limit provisions. We do not support incumbents amending a constitution to extend their hold on power. We believe doing so undermines a country's democratic institutions and stability. As President Obama said during his speech to the AU earlier this year, "When a leader tries to change the rules in the middle of the game just to stay in office, it risks instability and strife – as we've seen in Burundi. And this is often just a first step down a perilous path."

While Rwanda is pursuing an amendment process consistent with its constitution, the result may well be the same over time. Time and time again we see leaders sacrifice a country's progress, credibility, international standing, and economic, social, and political development in order to remain in power. A country - and a president - proves its strength not by amending its constitution, however lawfully, nor by the leader clinging to power for decades, but by respecting the rule of law of their own constitution, and by reinforcing and strengthening the democratic institutions that will ensure a stable, secure, and durable future for their country and people. Only through building those strong institutions and systems, and trusting in them and the people of the country to carry them forward, will sustainable democracy, development, and security be achieved.

We will continue to let the Rwandan government know our concerns about its efforts to pave the way for President Kagame to remain in office after 2017. President Kagame himself has repeatedly stated his commitment to respecting constitutional term limits, and we expect him to follow-through on that commitment, regardless of whether the constitution is amended. President Kagame said, "I am President because circumstances propelled me into that, but

it's not something I am dying for. I cannot be here and say I must be President for life.”

The fate of democracy in Rwanda is about much more than just the next election. Political freedoms continue to be limited, creating an environment where open debate and disagreements about security and political issues are rarely seen. Respect for human rights is a pillar of any democracy and a key aspect in evaluating the credibility of any election. As we told the Burundian government and continue to tell the DRC government, an election is about more than the day ballots are cast, it is about the process and the ability of citizens to have their voices heard without harassment or fear of persecution. A democracy proves its strength when it fully respects and upholds the freedom of expression by empowering citizens and members of the press to report on and discuss issues of public concern, however critical of the government.

We will continue to engage the Rwandan government and ruling party about human rights and democratic principles. As with Burundi and the DRC, we will also engage with civil society and opposition members. Improved respect for human rights is one of our top priorities for Rwanda. Rwanda has a once in a century opportunity to solidify the progress it has made over the past two decades and ensure the cementing of the democratic institutions and systems of the country into a firm foundation for the future. It can do this through a peaceful transition of power.

### **Takeaways from the Region**

These three case studies leave us with a number of observations. The first, and perhaps most important for purposes of U.S. policy, is that countries in the region are watching what happens in Burundi very closely and will similarly watch what happens in the Republic of Congo and the DRC. Countries are watching not only what steps other governments take, but what consequences are suffered from it. While Burundi is on the precipice, the fact that Nkurunziza has thus far managed to stay in power should provide no solace to others who are considering the same course of action. The Burundian crisis demonstrates that the consequences of this course include a collapsing economy, widespread insecurity, dire humanitarian consequences, targeted economic sanctions, and isolation from traditional partners.

This leads to the second observation, which is that there must be consequences when governments deliberately harm their own country to stay in power. A single individual should not be able to send 200,000 of his citizens fleeing the country,

create conditions in which hundreds of lives are lost, and suffer no consequence. The EU's decision to impose sanctions, perhaps followed by the AU's, and donors' decisions to suspend assistance are important in this regard.

The third observation is that high-level U.S. engagement will be pivotal between now and 2017. The region is keeping an eye on how we respond to actions in the region. President Obama's remarks at the AU were widely circulated within the region and lauded by people, though not always by leaders, across Africa. This policy is well grounded in experience, constitutions, and local support, and we believe U.S. leadership has a crucial role to play during this historic period.

The fourth observation is that we must continue to work closely with the AU and donor partners to maximize our diplomatic leverage and ensure clarity of message. The active coordination and engagement by the international team of envoys and the International Great Lakes Contact Group are pivotal here. I have been impressed by the level of daily coordination amongst these groups and believe our own engagement advances and is advanced by it.

The fifth observation is a well-known one, and that is that courageous citizens across the Great Lakes region take great personal risk each day to defend fundamental freedoms and a chance for a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic future. Heroes like Pierre Claver Mbonimpa and countless others face great personal risk to defend freedoms and a future that so many of us take for granted. The future of the region is forged by these leaders, but our policy can reinforce and protect their efforts.

Despite the worrying signs across the region, there remains time for each country to forge a positive path forward. Even in Burundi, there is a narrow window to opt for inclusive, immediate, and regionally-mediated dialogue to chart a consensus, peaceful path forward for the country. The DRC can still organize on-time, credible, and historic elections that put it on the path to realizing its bright and prosperous potential. And Rwanda's story could still be one of great economic growth *and* democratization, if the government prepares now for a 2017 transfer in executive power and commits to the protection of human rights and civil liberties. But time is of the essence, as is strong U.S. leadership and continued bipartisan support for our partnership with the people of the Great Lakes region.