



**Testimony of
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Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and International Organizations
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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am the director of the Voice of America (VOA) Africa Division—a division that reports in fifteen languages and reaches more than 68 million Africans each week on television, radio, and digital platforms.

The Voice of America is the largest of five media networks under the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the U.S. agency responsible for providing news and information to overseas audiences who lack access to independent or uncensored international, regional, and local media. VOA is the only BBG network in sub-Saharan Africa. We connect the continent with the United States through professional journalism, in accordance with the VOA Charter, but we also serve an additional authorized purpose of providing Africans with an independent voice in media.

I am going to focus my remarks today on our work in Burundi and the closing space for free speech in that country. I do not come to you as a policy expert or diplomat; I am a journalist. And in this profession I seek to find and report on the truth. I started my journalism career in 1966 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and was forced to flee my country in 1980 during conflict. I have seen the value of a free press in times of political turmoil and conflict, and I'm grateful to have the opportunity to share the experience of VOA in Burundi.

Burundi is one of the poorest countries in the world. Since unrest erupted in 2015, more than 400,000 Burundians have fled the country—many to the Nyarugusu, Nduta and Mtendeli refugee camps in Tanzania. Burundi's capacity to support a free press also has been significantly weakened by violence and political instability. Reporters Without Borders ranks the country 159th out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index. Freedom House reports that at least 100 journalists have fled the country since 2015. Well-known journalists have been intimidated. Media outlets that have been allowed to stay open have had to toe a careful line, most often through self-censorship.

VOA's status as an international broadcaster has allowed it to remain independent, and the editorial firewall granted by Congress in our founding legislation has been critical to maintaining our credibility. While VOA also broadcasts in AM, shortwave, television and on digital platforms, FM radio is by far the most popular means of reaching people. BBG owns the radio transmitters, and through a country-to-country agreement, the government of Burundi provides access to their radio towers and permission (a license) to broadcast on certain FM radio frequencies in the country.

We currently have two local dedicated FM stations—95.2 FM in Manga Hill and 94.9 FM in Bujumbura. On Manga, the tower belongs to government and we share an antenna with Radio Scolaire (School), a local station. In Bujumbura, the tower and antenna belong to the government.

In December 2017, the President of Burundi, Pierre Nkuruziza, announced that he was calling for a referendum to amend the constitution increasing the presidential term from five to seven years, and allowing himself to stand for re-election. If the referendum succeeds, he will be eligible to sit as President beyond 2030. He has been President since 2005.

On Friday, May 4—one day after World Press Freedom Day—VOA was informed at a press conference in Bujumbura that our broadcasts and BBC's would be suspended for six months, effective May 7. Radio France was given a warning. The Conseil Nationale de la Communication (CNC)—the government's media regulatory body—claimed that this suspension was in response to “biased reporting” and cases in which the radio services interviewed people with arrest warrants.

This suspension comes two weeks before the referendum on May 17, and it was a complete shock. For a number of years, the government has pushed VOA to agree to a set of conditions that would have prevented its reporters from saying anything critical about the government or ruling party or politicians, and thus preventing VOA from reporting independently or fairly on the state of politics in Burundi. This suspension—coupled with the naming of BBC and Radio France—has raised a new level of concern about the lengths to which the government will seek to censor VOA.

BBG and VOA sprang into action to address the prospect of losing our FM stations and more three million audience members. BBG's Office of Technology, Services and Innovation—which supports all VOA transmissions—arranged for extra shortwave broadcasts to accommodate new programming. Shortwave transmissions allow for cross-border reach, although currently they are not as popular as FM or AM radio. VOA began to run frequent promos on our FM stations to educate listeners about shortwave alternatives in the event we were taken off air. We replaced our regular pre-recorded Saturday and Sunday wrap-up news shows with live 30-minute newscasts. VOA Director Amanda Bennett issued a public statement expressing dismay by the CNC decision to deprive Burundi citizens of a trusted news source.

Our reporters also immediately jumped on this story, and it was covered widely through the Africa Division's language services. The Central Africa service launched two new digital products on its website as well as covering the story on Facebook and Twitter. On Friday, during our popular live call-in radio show *Murisanga*, we interviewed the legal advisor to the CNC, Gabriel Bihumugani, who stated that the decision to suspend VOA was not final and could be appealed in court. His comments suggested there may be a solution to the May 7 shutdown, and the BBG immediately engaged the State Department to seek diplomatic support. I would like to express my gratitude to the State Department, US Embassy Bujumbura, and Ambassador Anne Casper for their efforts to assist VOA. Previously, the Embassy has been engaged on behalf of BBG and VOA, and we remain grateful for its assistance.

On Sunday, the chairman of the CNC, Karenga Ramadhan, also appeared on VOA's call-in show. He claimed that VOA had violated its agreement with the government by using frequencies of a local station that had been suspended previously. The host of the show and others calling pushed back on this assertion, questioning how this could happen.

Unfortunately, the government followed through with its announcement. Our stringers throughout Burundi reported that VOA's FM frequencies were suspended Monday morning. Portions of northern Burundi and eastern Burundi are receiving some FM signals from other transmitters across the border. BBG's technical monitors report that the shortwave signals are being received, although shortwave will never be as clear as FM, particularly in urban areas.

We are committed to addressing the concerns of the government without sacrificing our editorial independence or journalistic standards. We are also watching this situation carefully for the safety of our journalists and their families. Previously, our journalists have been threatened in Burundi, and we have needed to evacuate five journalists over the past several years, with the most recent evacuation occurring during the end of 2017. We have contingency plans in place, if the need should arise.

The closure of our FM stations in Burundi will be a significant loss to the citizens of that country. VOA has a measured weekly audience of 57 percent of adults in Burundi—the highest reach of any international broadcaster including the BBC.¹ In the capital of Bujumbura, 85 percent of residents consume VOA content weekly. The primary language for our audience is Kirundi, but Burundians also consume VOA news in Swahili, French, and English—who are all reporting on this story.

All of these languages would be affected by a suspension, but the greatest impact would come to VOA's Central Africa language service which reports in Kirundi and Kinyarwanda. This service targets the Great Lakes region of sub-Saharan Africa, reaching audiences in Burundi, Rwanda, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), southern Uganda, and eastern Tanzania. In Burundi, the Kirundi service reaches 55 percent weekly—more than 3.2 million adults—primarily on the two dedicated FM frequencies in Bujumbura. It also broadcasts on AM and shortwave, and has a smaller audience on TV and digital.

The service has led reporting on issues of children's rights, human trafficking, women's health, and governance. It has regularly hosted Burundi government officials, such as First Vice President Gaston Sindimwo, to provide their perspective as well as opposition leaders to provide balance. Through popular call-in shows, the Central Africa service provides a platform for citizens to engage these leaders directly. The service has also investigated sensitive issues in the country, such as the plight of thousands of Burundians living in camps within the country. Soon after VOA's series of reports in mid-January 2017, local government officials thanked and praised VOA

¹ BBG contracts with third party vendors to conduct nationally representative surveys in all of its media markets. In Burundi, the research was carried out by Gallup with a survey sample of 1,600 interviews representative of the total population, plus an additional 400 conducted with Bujumbura residents to ensure reliable analysis in the national capital region. All results are weighted by age, education, gender, region and strata. BBG surveys ask respondents to recall their use of BBG media (on any platform) within the past week.

for the coverage. The Governor of the province along with other officials visited the sites, brought food assistance, and repaired and built new schools as well as sanitation facilities.

What is most impressive about this service is its level of trust among its audience in Burundi—91 percent trusts the news and information VOA provides. And eight in ten weekly users say that our coverage helps them form opinions on important issues.

For this reason, it is imperative that VOA continue to present accurate, balanced, and comprehensive news and information in Burundi. Our work is vital to providing a platform for civic engagement; maintaining space for free speech, including political speech; and supporting accountability—all fundamental tenets of an independent press.

This case in Burundi is purely symptomatic of the increasing difficulty we face in sub-Saharan Africa to support freedom of information, democracy, and human rights. In the past year, VOA has covered contentious elections in Kenya and Liberia and the political transition in Zimbabwe. We have faced jamming in Ethiopia. Ali Nur Siad, a cameraman working for VOA in Mogadishu, was killed in an October bombing. The threats to our independence, censorship, and the security of those working for us are daily realities for VOA.

We are grateful for the support of Congress to the Voice of America, especially to VOA in Africa. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak.