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Burundi: Update

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Summary

In recent months, President Pierre Buyoya's government has taken steps to strengthen democracy in Burundi in order to have the sanctions imposed by eight African nations lifted and bring greater stability to the small central African country. The government, twelve political parties, and three rebel groups have engaged in two rounds of peace talks mediated by former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, and the third began on October 13 in Arusha. Despite progress and a cease-fire agreement, the eight African nations voted unanimously in February to keep sanctions in place, even though some of the leaders favored the lifting of sanctions. Violence has escalated in recent weeks, with increasing reports of attacks and human rights abuses by both Hutu rebel groups and the Tutsi-dominated army. Buyoya has stepped up an international campaign to gain support for the lifting of sanctions, and most observers seem to agree that his government has met all the conditions for the lifting of sanctions.

Background

Burundi, a nation of 6 million people and one of the poorest countries in Africa, gained its independence on July 1, 1962, from United Nations Trusteeship under Belgian administration. Since independence, Burundian politics has been largely dominated by the Tutsi-led military and political establishment. In June 1993, Major Pierre Buyoya, who came to power in a bloodless coup in September 1987, ended the political grip of the military when he accepted his defeat in a multi-party election that he had called. However, the transfer of power to a Hutu-led government did not end the influence of the Tutsi, who represent 14 percent of the population, while the Hutu are about 85 percent.

Overview: Political Conditions

In mid-1993, Melchior Ndadaye, a Hutu, became president and attempted to implement a number of important changes in local government, to build a multi-ethnic cabinet coalition, and to increase diversity in the army. Critics charged that his reforms increased divisions in the country and threatened the Tutsi. Opposing these changes, a small group of Tutsi army officers attempted a military putsch in October 1993, assassinating Ndadaye along with several of his ministers. The putsch failed, but sparked

ethnic violence in which an estimated 100,000 people, mostly Tutsis, were killed. The ethnic violence subsided and the political crisis was resolved after prolonged negotiations between the ruling Hutu-dominated Burundi Democratic Front (Frodebu) and the Tutsi-dominated Union for National Progress (Uprona), the former ruling party. The negotiations resulted in the election of a new Speaker for the National Assembly, Sylvestre Ntibantunganya, who had succeeded President Ndadaye as leader of Frodebu. In late January 1994, Cyprien Ntaryamira, a Hutu and former Minister of Agriculture, was elected president by the National Assembly.

In April 1994, Ntaryamira was killed along with the President of Rwanda when the plane they were sharing was shot down over the airport at Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. Burundi authorities temporarily avoided a major political crisis by confirming Ntibantunganya as an interim president, and later president. In September 1994, after months of negotiations, the parties agreed on a power-sharing arrangement in which the ruling Frodebu agreed to give the opposition 45 percent of government positions, including the post of the prime minister. In early 1995, President Ntibantunganya agreed to replace the Speaker and the prime minister to avoid another crisis with the Tutsi-dominated parties and military. In spite of government attempts to restore calm, the political climate was characterized by instability and assassinations, with a high level of violence and chaos throughout the country.

The Buyoya Regime

In late July 1996, a group of Tutsi extremists attacked the President's motorcade at the funeral for 350 Tutsis killed by Hutu rebels and the President sought refuge at the U.S. ambassador's residence, fearing for his life. On July 25, 1996, the Burundi army seized power and appointed former military leader Pierre Buyoya as head of the military junta. Buyoya later suspended the National Assembly and banned all political activities. In his first public address, Buyoya appealed to the international community to help him bring stability and defended the takeover of power as a necessary step to "rescue a people in distress."

In response to the military takeover, Burundi's neighbors and several other African nations (Tanzania, Rwanda, Zaire/Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) imposed sanctions on the crisis-prone central African nation.¹ The countries outlined several conditions for the lifting of the sanctions: the restoration of the dissolved National Assembly; the reinstatement of political parties banned immediately after the coup; democratic reforms; the creation of a national unity government or similar power-sharing framework; unconditional internal peace negotiations with Hutu rebel and opposition groups; and participation in external peace talks. The Organization of African Unity, the United Nations, the United States, and the European Union all initially backed the sanctions.

The United States condemned the military takeover but, aside from public support for the regional embargo, refrained from taking additional measures to punish the military junta. Officials had stated earlier that the United States would not recognize a

¹Dellios, Hugh. "Burundi's Neighbors Vow to Bring New Military Regime 'To Its Knees': Economic Embargo Has Early Impact." *Chicago Tribune*. 8/8/96.

government which assumed power through military coup and would in fact work to isolate such a government. But the takeover by Buyoya, considered to be a moderate, constituted a major stumbling block. Some viewed Buyoya as the only leader capable of bringing stability to Burundi, while others feared embracing Buyoya could send the wrong message elsewhere in Africa.

Three months after taking power, Buyoya reopened the National Assembly and lifted the ban on political parties. Initially, he indicated that he would negotiate with the rebels only if they first laid down their arms, but in early October 1996, in a letter to regional heads of state, he demonstrated a willingness to participate in unconditional talks. These steps and responsive U.S. pressure to ease the sanctions notwithstanding, the African nations continued the embargo. The regional measures have had a serious impact on the Burundian economy and have also increased domestic pressure on Buyoya as extremists in both parties use the hardship to undermine his political power. In an apparent effort to counter opposition attacks, Buyoya arrested his most vocal critic, former president Jean-Baptiste Bagaza, on charges that he had plotted an assassination attempt on Buyoya. He has also made a year of military service mandatory for all university-age students.

Political Reforms in the Midst of Conflict

Buyoya's government has actively sought the lifting of all sanctions against Burundi, and has fulfilled, to some extent, all of the conditions for their removal. The National Assembly and political parties were both reinstated soon after the coup. Internal peace negotiations began in fall 1997, leading to the Internal Partnership for Peace and a new transitional constitution. Buyoya was sworn in as transitional president in June 1998, two days after signing into law the new transitional constitution designed to pave the way for a power-sharing government. In the transitional constitution, the position of prime minister was split into two vice presidential positions, one of whom will be responsible for the political and administrative domains, the other to supervise the economic and social domains, and to be filled by one Tutsi and one Hutu. The National Assembly was expanded from 80 to 121 members in order to accommodate opposition parties and regional interests, and the Constitutional Court will be reinstated in order to judge the constitutionality of laws and interpret the transitional constitution. The government also designated a conciliation body in case of disputes arising from the implementation of the transitional platform. External peace negotiations between the government and rebel groups represent the only remaining original condition for the lifting of sanctions. Initially addressed by the government of Burundi when the major rebel group and the government met in late 1996, all-inclusive external talks did not begin in earnest until earlier this year.

Hutu rebels continued their attacks in the countryside in early 1998 and gained ground in their push toward the capital.² The army also staged several attacks against rebel positions, most recently in late June. Burundian authorities have accused both the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania of harboring and supporting Hutu militias in refugee camps along their shared borders, as well as permitting hate radio to broadcast from their territories. Hutu members of the former Rwandan Armed Forces and the

²"Upsurge of Violence in Burundi." Panafican News Agency. 8/25/98.

Interahamwe militias have also aided the Burundian Hutu rebels.³ Late last year, Burundian and Tanzanian forces scuffled in several incidents on their border, and the Burundian diplomat to Tanzania was expelled. There have also been reports that the Tanzanian authorities in Dar es Salaam handed over the Burundian embassy and its accounts to the National Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD).

The Peace Process

After agreeing on an agenda earlier this year, peace talks were supposed to resume in mid-June 1998 in Arusha, Tanzania, led by mediator and former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere, but were postponed until July 20. Instead, Nyerere held private consultations with the delegations in order to establish the rules and agenda for the July talks. Seventeen factions, including the government, Frodebu, Uprona, and Hutu rebel groups CNDD, Palipehutu, and Frolina, all signed a cease-fire agreement to begin July 20, 1998. The agreement also fixed the length of negotiations at three months and foresaw the creation of commissions responsible for negotiating issues related to the establishment of a democratic, power-sharing government. Talks began on July 21, 1998, in Arusha, and lasted for ten days, focusing predominantly on the rules of procedure and debate on the root cause of the problem in Burundi. Discussions resumed behind closed doors in Arusha in mid-October, and delegates are expected to select the leaders of the proposed sub-committees during talks expected to last two to three weeks. Some analysts point out that the progress of the fighting in the DRC could impact the peace process in Burundi, since the Burundian rebels would have a strengthened position if the DRC government regains control of the eastern Kivu provinces.⁴

Some rebel groups, including the armed wing of the main Hutu rebel group CNDD, refuse to honor the cease-fire, and the army maintains that it does not apply to government forces, which it argues need to protect citizens from rebel attacks. The CNDD recently split, suspending its leader Leonard Nyangoma and appointing the head of its armed wing, Colonel John Bosco Ndayikengurukiye, in his place in May; however, Nyangoma insists he remains in charge.⁵ This division has led to confusion as to the identity of the CNDD representative accepted by both the rebels and the other parties to the peace talks. In June, the CNDD rejected the political changes in Burundi as unconstitutional and vowed to continue its campaign for democracy. The hardline Tutsi wing of Uprona, Buyoya's own party, ousted its leader Charles Mukasi on October 5, replacing him with Information Minister Luc Rukingama. Mukasi is considered an extremist opposed to the cease-fire agreement and external talks in general and has accused Buyoya of complicity with "those who teach genocide and ethnic racism...like Frodebu"⁶ Rukingama, a Buyoya supporter, is considered a moderate. Mukasi's ouster was likely intended to strengthen the legitimacy of the peace process by ensuring Uprona's continued participation, since Mukasi had pledged to boycott the negotiations. The move suggests increased efforts to minimize the role of extremists in determining the political future of Burundi.

³Buckley, Stephen. "3 Countries Feel Hutu Rebels' Wrath: Refugees' Attacks on Tutsis Cost Lives, Threaten Stability in Rwanda, Burundi, Congo." *Washington Post*. 1/28/98

⁴"Burundi Talks Postponed until Tuesday." <http://www.anc.org>.

⁵"New Leader for Hutu Rebels in Burundi." BBC World News. 5/8/98.

⁶"Burundi's Main Tutsi Party Ousts Leader." CNN World News. 10/7/98.

Sanctions Debate

In early September 1997, east and central African leaders met in the Tanzanian capital, Dar es Salaam, to discuss the embargo on Burundi. Despite calls by some to lift the sanctions, the leaders voted to keep them in place. Ethiopia, Zambia, and Kenya supported the lifting of the sanctions, while Tanzania, Uganda and Rwanda argued to keep the sanctions until the government made additional reforms. In April 1997, the east and central African leaders partially lifted sanctions for basic goods such as food, medical and educational supplies, and fuel. The nations also imposed several new conditions to have the embargo fully removed: the release of former president Jean-Baptiste Bagaza from house arrest; the closure of the forced Hutu regroupment camps; the suspension of all ethnic crimes trials until an impartial judicial system is established; and permission for all Burundian political figures to travel abroad for participation in the peace process.

Buyoya and his government have sought to fulfill these latest conditions as well. In June 1997, former president Ntibantunganya left the U.S. ambassador's residence after almost a year in hiding, and has been an active participant in the peace process. Former president Bagaza was released from house arrest in late February 1998, and has also been involved in the negotiations, although many observers feel his influence decreased significantly while he was in detention. Presidential Special Envoy Howard Wolpe reported in March that the Burundian government had closed the vast majority of the Hutu regroupment camps, which had contained 10% of the population. The new constitution calls for the beginning of the reconstruction of the Burundian judicial system, a process that will likely be helped by the new \$30 million U.S. Great Lakes Justice Initiative.⁷

There are adversary views over the sanctions. In a speech to the United Nations General Assembly, Buyoya stated that the sanctions had destroyed the economic and social fabric of Burundi, jeopardized its stability, and eroded the trust between the mediating parties and the parties to the conflict. He added that the security situation in Burundi is no worse than that in any other country in the Great Lakes region, and thus should be treated in the same manner.⁸ Buyoya has also accused the Tanzanian government of being biased in favor of Hutu rebels and therefore opposed to lifting the sanctions. Some Western officials have agreed; one called the embargo a "red herring," adding that, "It's serving no purpose apart from making a bunch of Tanzanians rich. It's certainly not working."⁹ However, others blame Buyoya for economic hardship, pointing out his investments in the military rather than the economy.

On the international level, some governments and organizations have been encouraging the lifting of sanctions for quite some time. In December 1997, the U.N. Human Rights rapporteur for Burundi, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, urged the African nations to review the embargo against Burundi. In January 1998, the OAU mission leader to Burundi called for an end to the sanctions; however, during the OAU meeting in May, despite reports that most members favored lifting the sanctions, the embargo was upheld,

⁷Office of the Press Secretary, the White House. *Fact Sheet: Countering Genocide and Promoting Human Rights*. 3/25/98.

⁸United Nations Press Release. 9/22/98..

⁹See, for example, Simmons, Ann. "Burundi Rebel Attacks. Extremists in Ruling Elite Block Peace." *Los Angeles Times*. 1/18/98.

apparently at the request of Julius Nyerere, who wants to use the promise of the removal of sanctions as incentive for participation in the peace talks.¹⁰ Both France and the EU envoy to the Great Lakes region, Aldo Ajello, have declared that the sanctions should be lifted. Three Members of Congress recently sent a letter to the Clinton Administration stating that “removal of sanctions is warranted at this time,” and requesting the United States to “use its influence with these governments [voting to keep the sanctions in place] to seek a change in Burundi’s situation, particularly in view of the obstacle sanctions might pose to the peace process.”¹¹

U.S. Policy

The Clinton Administration endorses a political settlement to the problems in Burundi, and supports the regional peace efforts. The State Department recently declared that the Arusha talks in June had been “very positive and significant” and that the Burundi government had “met a number of very important milestones.” The statement urged regional leaders “to send a positive signal” to Burundi’s leaders.¹² The U.S. government is not directly involved in the peace process, but has been actively engaged in seeking a peaceful settlement in Burundi through diplomatic means. Presidential Special Envoy Howard Wolpe has travelled to Burundi several times to assist in facilitating the peace process. In congressional testimony in March 1998, Wolpe identified the broad United States objectives to be the prevention of another round of massive ethnic killings, ending the violence, encouraging a negotiated settlement, and addressing humanitarian needs.¹³ Wolpe also reiterated the U.S. commitment to hold the Burundian government to its promise to disband all of the regroupment camps, and urged that ethnic crimes trials and executions be ended.

Buyoya came to Washington in September 1998 and met with members of the House Subcommittee on Africa and senior Administration officials. He emphasized the progress toward a political solution to the conflict in Burundi, and described the sanctions as detrimental to the population and an obstacle to the peace process. He argued that his government had met all the specified conditions, and suggested that the U.S. government put pressure on Museveni and Nyerere to lift the sanctions. He also called for the resumption of U.S. economic aid and cooperation with Burundi as a reward for progress toward peace and democracy, and in order to support the process in the eyes of the population.

¹⁰*Uganda Confidential*. 7/10-16/98.

¹¹The Honorable Benjamin A. Gilman, Donald M. Payne, and Tom Campbell. Letter to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. 10/6/98.

¹²Rubin, James. Statement of the U.S. Department of State. 7/6/98.

¹³Wolpe, Howard. Prepared Testimony before the House International Relations Committee, Subcommittees on International Operations and Human Rights and Africa. 3/5/98.