

Peacebuilding Commission, Burundi Configuration – Meeting of the Steering Group

New York, Swiss Mission to the United Nations, 10 June 2014

On Tuesday, 10 June 2014, the Steering Group of the Burundi Configuration of the PBC held a luncheon meeting at the Swiss Mission. Burundi was represented by Ambassador Herménégilde Niyonzima. The Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) was represented by Deputy Director Kenneth Gluck. The main purpose of the meeting was to debrief Steering Group members on the Chair's visit to Burundi and partner capitals from May 21 to 31 May 2014.

The Chair started by thanking all delegations that had facilitated his visit to Bujumbura, Brussels (EU, Belgium), Paris, Kigali and Arusha (EAC). He then provided Steering Group members with an overview over the main findings of his trip. The Chair also referred to his written report that he had already shared with all Configuration members on 4 June 2014.

In his meetings in Brussels and Paris there was general convergence of views about Burundi with representatives of the Belgian and French Foreign Ministries as well as the European Union, the Chair said. He noted that while all interlocutors lauded the consensual adoption of the new electoral law and the signing by all political actors of a code of conduct for the 2015 elections, concerns regarding the current political situation in Burundi remained, particularly the lack of political space in view of the 2015 elections. In this regard, the Chair informed that the EU told him that it was considering deploying an electoral observer mission to Burundi. The exchanges in Europe also focused on possible means for the international partners to further engage with Burundi given the current critical situation. The Chair said that he discussed the possibility with interlocutors in Brussels and Paris of creating positive financial incentives in aid disbursement for Burundi to improve on the political front. The Chair further noted the challenge of achieving a more coordinated and coherent position among the donor community. On the other hand the Chair lauded the continued committed engagement of the international community in Burundi – citing the recent joint visit by the UN, EU, AU and US Special Envoys to Bujumbura as an example – and encouraged everyone to continue on this path. Lastly, the Chair also mentioned that the idea of a roundtable meeting which he had been floating for a while was positively received in Brussels and Paris but that all agreed that it should not be another pledging exercise but rather conceived as an open and frank dialogue between the Government of Burundi and the international community.

The Chair then turned to his meetings in Bujumbura where, as per usual practice, he had extensive talks with government representatives, including the President and the Vice President, all major political parties, civil society and the international community. The Chair observed that he got divergent views on the political situation by government officials and opposition representatives. While the former depicted

an image of calm and stability sometimes interrupted by isolated events which from the government's perspective were normal for a pre-electoral phase, the latter complained about restriction of political space, intimidation and harassment exacerbated by an atmosphere of impunity. Despite these concerns, the Chair positively noted the opposition's ongoing commitment to participate in the 2015 elections, even in the case that the current President would run for office again. In the same vein, the Chair remarked that the government representatives also showed some flexibility regarding the soon to be deployed UN electoral observer mission by admitting that its mandate should not be restricted to a purely technical support function but have a strong political dimension as well. Despite all legitimate concerns about the political situation, the Chair did not miss to mention that, in his opinion, the ongoing tensions were political at this time and not of an ethnic nature—an aspect that was shared by all his interlocutors. Regarding the human rights situation in the country, the Chair mentioned the case of Pierre Claver Mbonimpa, a prominent and respected human rights activist, who was arrested on charges of threatening State security. The Chair called upon Burundian justice to ensure a fair legal process and suggested to the government to treat such cases with a greater sense of serenity in general. Regarding the proposed roundtable, the Chair said that it was welcomed by government officials in light of reestablishing trust with the international community. The Chair reported that it was agreed that the roundtable should not represent another Geneva-type of partners' conference but rather be restricted in number and focus on mutual commitments between Burundi and its main bilateral and institutional partners. He also noted that the proposed roundtable would ideally come up with a mutually agreed upon way forward (a kind of "blueprint") to the elections and beyond. The second half of October was mentioned as possible timeframe for the roundtable, which would most probably take place in Bujumbura and be hosted by the Government of Burundi according to the principle of national ownership.

The Chair then turned to the aspect of regional engagement and complemented African countries and regional organizations for their constructive and committed role over the last months. He noted that the fact that regional players would take a stance was important because otherwise criticism could be perceived as a purely Western agenda. He cited his meeting with the Rwandan Foreign Minister in Kigali who ensured him of Rwanda's continued support and major interest in the stability of its southern neighbor. The Chair further underlined the importance of regional integration for the long-term stability of Burundi, an aspect that he wanted to emphasize by visiting the SG of the EAC in Arusha. The Chair also reported that he learned from his exchanges with the SG that the EAC wanted to deploy an electoral mission to Burundi as well. The Chair noted that he saw an added value for the Configuration to engage with regional actors and said that he wanted to continue with this kind of outreach on his next trips. Lastly, the Chair also touched upon his discussions with the international financial institutions. He said that while refraining from taking a position on political aspects there was growing concern among IFIs with regard to the sustainability of their investments in Burundi if the macroeconomic and political contexts, fiscal policy and revenue generation would not improve.

In concluding, the Chair summarized once again his mixed analysis of the situation in Burundi and reemphasized the need for continued constructive engagement by the international community with the Burundian government. He also recommended deploying the UN electoral observer mission to the country as soon as possible. Regarding the roundtable, he noted that he would further refine the draft concept note based on his discussions with relevant partners and then submit it to the Government of Burundi for consideration.

Following the Chair's remarks, the Ambassador of Burundi, Herménégilde Niyonzima, took the floor. He thanked the Chair for his briefing and findings, which he largely shared. He then drew the attention of Configuration members to the alleged arming and training of members of the Imbonerakure, which he dismissed as baseless and motivated by opposition propaganda. He further insisted that the case of Pierre Claver Mbonimpa would indeed constitute a threat to peace and security of his country and that justice would take care of it. He concluded by saying that the complaints by the opposition that political space was restricted were unjustified and that every political party had the right to hold rallies as long as they were in compliance with existing laws.

Consequently, Rwanda, Belgium, the Netherlands, the EU and the Deputy Director of the Peacebuilding Support Office, Kenneth Gluck, took the floor. In general, all delegations underscored the importance of continued engagement by the international community. A constructive dialogue, it was noted, was the way forward and the PBC as platform comprising all relevant actors had a particular role to play in this regard. In this context, the roundtable was welcomed by everyone in order to reestablish trust and confidence. Belgium insisted that it regarded progress on the political dialogue and international assistance to Burundi as two sides of the same coin. The European Union then announced a contribution of € 8 million to the UNDP basket fund for the 2015 elections and confirmed that it was awaiting the approval for its planned electoral mission.

Responding to several questions by Configuration members regarding the proposed roundtable the Chair explained that it would basically aim at two things: take stock of and assess mutual commitments taken in 2012 in Geneva and, based on that, offer a perspective for Burundi's future, including but also going beyond 2015. The roundtable, the Chair said, would ideally constitute some sort of stepping stone by providing a blueprint for the country's medium and long-term perspective and elaborate concrete expected targets and outcomes in this regard. The Chair concluded the meeting by reminding Steering Group members that he would soon come up with an updated concept not on the roundtable, which he would share and discuss with all relevant stakeholders.
