

Peacebuilding Commission, Burundi Configuration – Meeting of the Steering Group

New York, Swiss Mission to the United Nations, 23 April 2014

On Wednesday, 23 April 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. Also present were the Chair of the Peacebuilding Commission, Ambassador Antonio Patriota, and ASG Judy Cheng-Hopkins. The main purpose of the meeting was to discuss recent developments in Burundi and next steps in the Configuration's engagement.

The Chair started by giving an overview over developments since the last meeting of the Burundi Configuration on 12 March 2014. In general, he described the situation in Burundi as volatile, stating that a tense calm seemed to reign in the country in view of the elections in 2015. Mistrust characterized the relations between the government and the opposition as well as, to a certain extent, between the government and Burundi's main international partners. On the national level, he noted that following the violent clashes on 8 March between police forces and members of an opposition party (MSD) 21 people sympathizing with the opposition had been sentenced to life in prison and 26 more had been given shorter jail terms. Despite the fact that some police officers had been taken hostage by opposition force, the life sentences appeared to be harsh and disproportionate. The Chair also mentioned the parliamentary vote on the revision of the Constitution, which had failed to achieve the required majority on 21 March. He further noted that the proposed constitutional review would not have respected the December consensus of Kigobe and would have put into question the heritage of Arusha.

Parallel to these internal tensions, the Chair said, relations between the international community and Burundi were also suffering from a growing lack of trust. Recent reports of alleged arming and training of members of the Imbonerakure in certain provinces by representatives of the national army had added another worrisome element to the current tensions. The Chair mentioned that the Security Council, alarmed by recent developments, had met twice in closed consultations since the adoption of resolution 2137 (on 26 March and 8 April) to discuss the situation in Burundi¹. He also noted efforts by other international stakeholders to diffuse tensions

¹ On 24 April, a day after the Steering Group meeting, the Security Council met again to discuss Burundi in closed consultations.

such as US Ambassador Samantha Power's visit to Bujumbura on 8 April or the joint letter written to President Nkurunziza by UN Special Envoy Robinson, US Special Envoy Feingold, EU Special Envoy Vervaeke and AU Special Representative Diarra. The Chair then turned to his own efforts over the last weeks. He stated that the purpose of his meetings with various interlocutors was basically twofold: to discuss issues in connection with the UN's transition and to engage in an exchange on possible ways to diffuse current tensions. He informed Steering Group members of his meetings with UNDP administrator Helen Clark and representatives of the Department of Political Affairs to discuss the UN's post-BNUP presence in Burundi, and of a telephone conference with the World Bank's Vice President for Africa, Makhtar Diop. Given current circumstances the Chair said that he had pleaded with UNDP for nominating a future Resident Coordinator with the necessary political profile. With the World Bank's VP for Africa the Chair had assessed the current situation and had been told that the Bank was concerned about its investments in Burundi because of the political developments. The Chair also mentioned that he had met in New York with the Burundian Ministers of the Interior and of national solidarity, human rights and gender. He said that he had used this occasion to convey his concerns about the current situation to the ministerial delegation and discuss measures to get out of the impasse. The Chair informed the Steering Group members that he had agreed with the Ministers to prepone his next visit to Bujumbura to the second half of May – combining it with a trip to neighboring countries and regional organizations to the extent possible. The Chair also said that he further discussed the idea of a roundtable meeting between Burundi and its main international partners as a follow-up step to the 2012 Geneva Conference. He underlined that he had received support for this plan by the Burundian delegation and that he would start working on a concept paper in this regard, which he would then discuss with key partners. The Chair further noted that such a roundtable could be convened around a midterm assessment of the second-generation Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP-II).

Following the Chair's remarks, Ambassador Niyonzima took the floor. He underscored that the situation in his country was not volatile, but stable, although he conceded that his government had committed errors in its communications strategy after the adoption of Council resolution 2137. He dismissed allegations whereby members of the Imbonerakure would be armed and trained as completely baseless – nevertheless noting that he appreciated the fact that the Security Council cared about his country – and reiterated that his government would stand ready to prove their falseness. He welcomed the Chair's intention to travel to Burundi earlier and

expressed his hope that he would contribute to easing the tensions between the Burundian Government and the international community.

Assistant Secretary-General Cheng-Hopkins urged Burundi to rekindle the spirit of the Geneva Conference and to get back on track with regard to the mutually agreed upon commitments. She underlined that certainly not all concerns expressed by the international community were baseless and encouraged all to find ways out of the current crisis and restore the constructive atmosphere of mutual trust and support. She informed Steering Group members that the PBF remained committed to the third Peacebuilding Priority Plan (PPP-III) but noted, also following the Chair's advice, that more time was needed to find constructive ways to address especially two (national dialogue/social cohesion as well as youth) of the four priorities.

The Chair of the Peacebuilding Commission, Ambassador Patriota, also took the floor. He supported the Chair's intention to place his upcoming trip in the context of improving communications and to engage in a constructive dialogue with various stakeholders. He particularly encouraged the Chair to meet with representatives of the political youth groups. He appealed to everyone's sense of responsibility in handling the current situation and underscored that a relapse into conflict of yet another PBC country should be avoided at all costs.

Consequently, Nigeria, China, South Africa, Japan, Belgium, France, the United States and the European Union also took the floor. In general, everyone expressed concerns at the current situation and welcomed the Chair's ideas of an earlier trip to Bujumbura as well as of convening a roundtable meeting as a confidence-building measure. South Africa deplored the mistrust that appeared to reign between the Burundian government, the opposition and the international community, and encouraged the Chair to contribute to reestablishing much-needed trust. It further underlined that if the Burundian government would be serious about wanting to increase foreign direct investment, the negative news had to stop. France as penholder in the Council stated that more Council meetings should be expected in the coming months since the Security Council was committed to stand by Burundi during this critical period. The United States expressed its admiration for the progress that had been achieved so far in Burundi calling it "a model PBC agenda country" and underscored that US insistence on maintaining an open political environment based on the respect of the rule of law had to be seen in the context of a genuine sense of friendship. China urged the Chair to listen to Burundi's concerns

and to engage even more with government authorities given the current circumstances. Finally, the European Union voiced its express support for the idea of a roundtable meeting.

In conclusion, the Chair informed Steering Group members that he intended to convene the Steering Group again shortly before his trip to Burundi in order to discuss the programme of his visit and issues to take up with various interlocutors.
