



Mouvement des Femmes et Filles pour la Paix et la Sécurité

Address to the United Nations Security Council on the Burundi Crisis

New York, NY

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Your Excellency, Ambassador Mathew Rycroft, Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the United Nations Security Council for the month of March,

Your Excellencies, distinguished members of the Security Council,

I stand before you today, *not as an expert*, but a humble representative of the Women and Girls Movement for Peace and Security in Burundi. We are part of the women's movement. We trace our roots to the participation of independent Burundian women in the Arusha peace process through the personal intervention of the mediator, and father of Burundian peace, the late Nelson Mandela.

I speak today on behalf of those women, who, true to their legacy of action and commitment, marched on the streets of Bujumbura on May 10 to 13 2015 against Nkurunziza's third term, before being hunted down, with many of them making harrowing journeys across our borders. I stand before you today because I am fortunate to enjoy the freedoms that my sisters do not have today. The vast majority of them are in hiding in Burundi. Dozens of our members are in exile, refugee camps, and many have lost their lives.

As Council members are aware, women and girls constitute more than 60 percent of the total Burundian refugee population of 405, 735. The vast majority of them, 50 percent of registered female Burundian refugees in Tanzania alone, have reported sexual violence. Clearly, women and girls have suffered most in this crisis, and as such they represent, in their own right, the suffering people of Burundi, who are seeking the help of this Council, and speaking to you, through me.

Mr President, Council Members

Nearly half a million Burundians fled their country in under 22 months. One respected international agency with a field presence in Burundi puts the overall number of people displaced by this conflict, internally and externally, to 4.2 million, out of a total of 10.5 million. That is 4, out of every 10 Burundians and it is truly tragic. The statistic is staggering, but it is supported by abundant anecdotal evidence. Burundians are once again a struggling people.

I was not in the country when the crisis erupted, but most of my direct and extended family is displaced. This is the reality of every single member of our movement. We have mourned loved ones killed, made efforts to trace those who have disappeared, and kept records. This is what our day to day work looks like. Speaking before this Council is therefore to us, more than citizen diplomacy. It is a most solemn undertaking. If it can lead to the saving of even one life, then it is worth it.

Mr President, Council Members,

The report of our Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, on Burundi, is a grave reminder of the appalling situation in Burundi. It echoes many of the findings of the United Nations Independent Investigation (UNIB) on Burundi that highlighted a systematic pattern of violations that seem to fit into a disturbing calculus of control that is based on the threat, and use of extreme forms of violence, a pervasive lack of physical security of the individual, and widespread impunity. History has shown that when a regime begins to tie its political survival, and its calculus, on its ability to unleash violence, then mass atrocities becomes a question of when, not if.

The Burundi government dismissed these findings, withdrew cooperation with the UN system, registered its intent to pull out of the International Criminal Court and declared UN investigators *personae non grata*. It insists that the situation is normal, and warns of an international neocolonial plot to overthrow it.

Council members must however be aware, that the concerns raised by the wider international community are shared by Africans. In fact, it was the African Union that led the way by conducting a fact-finding mission in Burundi, nine months before the UN established its investigation mechanism. The fact-finding mission, carried out by the African Union Commission on Human and Peoples Rights in December 2015, reached many of the conclusions that UNIB reached in its September 2016 report. It was this commission, a body of the African people, which called for the deployment of an international police mission in Burundi. And it also warned of genocidal violence.

It was this commission, Mr. President, and Council members that called for an independent internationally supervised Special Tribunal for Burundi. The charge of neo colonial bias is therefore misplaced. The AU's decision to deploy a 5,000 strong civilian protection force to Burundi, which the regime refused to consent, and went further by threatening to shoot African peacekeepers, cannot have been taken lightly. Yet at the time, refugee numbers stood at around 200,000. African concerns about Burundi are further underscored by the fact that in May 2015, when the recorded death toll stood at 77 and refugee numbers at 40,000, East African Community leaders considered the situation serious enough to request the Burundi authorities to postpone the elections and consider establishing a Government of National Unity after the delayed polls.

Although these requests were turned down, this call by East African leaders, Mr. President, was unprecedented, and it is a reflection that they too are aware that not all is well in my native country.

Mr. President, Council Members

The human cost of this crisis sometimes gets lost in statistics and data. I have visited refugee camps in the sub region several times since the crisis erupted. Our movement works very closely with Burundian refugees in urban settings and in refugee camps in the sub-region and in partnership with other indigenous organizations, including *Maison Shalom*, an internationally renowned Burundian NGO.

I got back from my last visit a few days ago. As with other Burundian refugee settlements, Mahama camp in Rwanda instantly generates powerful feelings of belonging.

I met relatives I had not known were there, participated in camp meetings and joined some members of the community in cultural performances. But underneath all this, every single resident has a story to tell, of pain, dispossession, violation and horror. Like one woman, a single mother, ### (not her real name) who fled Burundi last December. Members of a state sponsored militia, the *Imbonerakure*, accosted her during a nocturnal patrol in her neighborhood. In vivid details she described how they pinned her down, raped her, all the while using ethnic taunts.

Subsequent conversations with our partners and colleagues have been filled with other traumatic stories: Like a young lady in her 20s who told how she was forced to witness the murder of her husband. Another traumatic encounter, was a woman who had been on the road for more than 3 days, was welcomed by *Maison Shalom* and stayed in silence, rocking herself interminably. Or another woman who was forced to stay besides the dead body of her husband for more than three hours, while intelligence agents were throwing ethnic insults at her.

The Women and Girls Movement for Peace and Security has made its priority to collect first hand testimonies in an effort to build a body of memory that can aid us in the search for justice and accountability when the time comes. It is a daunting task given the levels of trauma involved, but we are convinced that it must be done.

Mr President, Council Members

Our movement participated in the EAC led peace process directly, and also indirectly through discreet engagements and people-to-people contacts.

In between these engagements, we held regional consultations and meetings in Entebbe in December 2015, and more recently in January and February 2017. The last series of consultations, Mr President, brought together women leaders from Burundi, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan and Rwanda, to reflect together on critical issues in the Burundi conflict, share tactics and strategies for peace that have worked in their settings.

We have also solicited, Mr President, critical inputs from women leaders across the region on scenarios and proposals for a just and inclusive peace and crucially, a vision for Burundi beyond the current crisis.

In reflecting on what we have learned from our involvement in the peace talks, and from our regional consultations, four things stand out.

1. Peace talks will not be sustainable if citizen safety and security is not secured

The experience of the 2000 Arusha peace talks makes it abundantly clear that citizen security is a vital requirement for confidence building. The killings, abductions, and enforced disappearances must stop, *period*. **Burundians are requesting this Council to exert its influence in revisiting the deployment of African Prevention and Protection Mission to Burundi, and the AU's call for the deployment of international police monitors.**

2. The Region Needs to Speak with One Voice

During the 2000 Arusha Peace process, because of the sense of regional unity, with Nyerere and Mandela as focal points, regional leaders did not hesitate to apply coercive measures such as imposing a comprehensive trade and movement embargo on Burundi in an effort to bring the regime to the table. Such measures are today necessary.

3. A Robust Regional Architecture to Support the Talks is Required

Mandela established a professional mediation secretariat that merged the expertise of the Mwalimu Nyerere and Mandela Foundations, as a permanent negotiating mechanism, and not an ad-hoc process. Furthermore, a Regional Peace Initiative (RPI) chaired by Uganda, was tasked to support the mediation team, and staffed by some of the region's best diplomats. This focused regional approach enabled the mediation secretariat to punch way above its weight.

With this calibrated approach lacking, we are calling on this Council to mobilize *to the fullest extent*, the UN apparatus to establish an international contact group to work closely with the EAC facilitation team, to include logistical, financial and technical support.

4. An Inclusive Process is Needed

Mandela did a number of things worth considering. First, he established a channel to reach out to the armed groups who had been left out of the earlier process. Second, he established a track two initiative, to reach out to civil society, youth, women and even refugees and internally displaced persons. Third, he reached out to the Burundian media and urged them to educate and sensitize Burundians about every step in the negotiations---a move that helped build confidence, and a critical factor that eventually facilitated the return of refugees.

We must learn from this wisdom. The regime views large sections of our civil society, and our special interest groups such as youth, women and refugees as opponents, even enemies and “coup plotters.” These sections of our society have borne the brunt of violence in our country because of the resistance they put up in defense of constitutional principles and the Arusha Accords. Movements such as the *Halte au Troisième Mandat*, are not coup plotters, and enemies of the state. They, along with the broad swath of civil society, along with other critical actors, cannot be ignored in the search for peace.

Mr President, Council Members,

Let us conclude by focusing on additional actions that this Council, *the Council of all the people of the world*, can do going forward.

1. Justice and Accountability

This Council should focus its energy on placing accountability at the center of the peace talks, drawing on the work of the UN and AU independent investigations and the ongoing Commission of Inquiry. The Burundian political elite, irrespective of which side of the crisis they find themselves, must understand that it will not be business as usual.

2. Investigations

Forensic assistance and other technical expertise will be required to enable and assist investigations on the ground in Burundi and the region. Such expertise has already been offered by the UN Independent Investigation on Burundi with respect to the information it corroborated on the existence of mass graves. This Council should work with relevant UN and AU organs to see to it that critical assistance and required capabilities are placed at the disposal of investigators. Ongoing monitoring efforts should also be extended to the Collines. There are 2,639 of them in the country. The flight to safety always begins at the Colline, and as the smallest administrative unit, it provides a crucial link between the state and villages. **The Colline is central to the means and methods of control, and Council members should be aware that the *Imbonerakure* is organized at the Colline level. That, is where most of the violence is centered, explaining the staggering refugee numbers.**

As the peace process takes shape, this Council should focus on the following,

1. Unintended consequences of Burundi's continued participation in peace missions

While we applaud the performance of our troops in peace missions we are also mindful that, through no fault of their own, such missions have become an avenue for the regime to secure much needed revenues that it uses to fortify its domestic position. To illustrate this, council members should be aware that through exchange rate manipulation, the troops are not getting what is due to them and the government gets the rest. Furthermore, in a climate of declining levels of trust, and breakdown of the rule of law, the prospect of participating in peace missions is being used as leverage to secure compliance by officers to regime objectives. We want to state categorically that our intentions are not malicious. Many of us have relatives serving in the army, and on various missions. They are part and parcel of the Burundian society and the families they leave behind are not unaffected by what is going on in the country. Perhaps nothing better captures this point than the growing incidences of officers choosing to defect after completing their tours of duty abroad. We think that the time has come for this Council to begin thinking critically about the unintended consequences of Burundi's continued participation in international missions, and in particular, the fact that such participation contributes to the ongoing crisis.

2. Security Sector Reform

The Burundian army, once our pride and joy, and symbol of the Arusha spirit is badly damaged. It is currently fracturing under the weight of political interference, unethical orders and suspicion along ethnic lines. The ongoing abductions and gruesome acts of torture of army officers are reflective of this state of affairs. This army will have to be rebuilt after the crisis, and as such this Council will have a role to play in ensuring that security sector reform is taken into account in peace talks.

3. Electoral Assistance

Free, fair and credible elections will have to be held at the end of the transition, irrespective of how such a transition comes about. These however should be organized, managed and supervised by the East African Community, African Union and United Nations. Crucially this should include regional and international management of the electoral machinery such as ballots, polling equipment and tallying. Burundians have been craving for an opportunity to exercise their democratic right to vote. This Council could play a major role in mobilizing international support for internationally managed poll as that will contribute immensely to confidence building and stabilization.

Conclusion

Mr President, Council Members:

In 1994, in Rwanda, we said that “we did not act because we did not have sufficient information and early warning signs”. Today, in Burundi, we have MORE than enough information and an abundant amount of early warning signs. This is captured in several reports by the East African Community, the EAC Legislative Assembly, the report of the Attorneys General and Ministers of Justice of the East African Community, comprehensive investigations by the African Union and the United Nations.

Mr President, the early warning systems have worked. Let us not make them pointless by failing to act.

God Bless you. The refugees in my country tremendously value the invitation you extended to the Women and Girls Movement to be present before you. We continue to support and welcome your efforts to bring this tragedy to an end.

Thank you