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Burundi Needs More than Rhetoric on Responsibility

International community must act now to prevent atrocity crimes

New York—The international community must take timely and decisive action to protect populations in Burundi who could be at risk of mass atrocity crimes due to a surge in violence surrounding upcoming elections, the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP) said today.

Actors at the international, regional, and national levels frequently underscore their dedication to the prevention of atrocity crimes. Many have said that prevention is the most crucial, cost-effective, and efficient way to implement their Responsibility to Protect (RtoP), a norm under which United Nations (UN) member states agreed that they have an obligation to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing.

“With the quickly devolving situation in Burundi, the international community has an opportunity to match its rhetoric on prevention with actual action, in line with its Responsibility to Protect,” **said Don Deya, chair of the ICRtoP.**

Burundi exhibits several risk factors, as outlined in the UN’s Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes, which create an environment conducive to atrocities. The country has suffered from a tumultuous and violent history of such crimes, including a 1972 genocide which killed 200,000 Hutus and a disastrous 12-year civil war in which 300,000 Tutsis and Hutus died. Both economic instability (driven by land ownership disputes) and political instability (such as the recent coup attempt and intimidation by the Imbonerakure) plague Burundi.

President Pierre Nkurunziza’s maneuvers to secure a third term have the potential to reverse the hard-won peace secured by the 2000 Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement. The upcoming presidential election, set for 26 June 2015, is already serving as a “triggering” factor for increased violence and unrest, including the displacement of 50,000 people and brutal crackdowns on human rights. Such incidences can further aggravate tensions and spark the onset of atrocity crimes.

“There is indeed a high risk that the current political situation in Burundi could lead to ethnic and inter-community massacres,” **said Joel Bayubahe of the Burundian civil society organization and ICRtoP member Youth Action for Development.** “The regional and international community’s response must be proportionate to what we are trying to avoid—the next Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, or Sudan.”

Despite the warning signs, international actors have so far failed to take the action necessary to prevent atrocities and protect populations. Though responses—such as the East African Community’s emergency summit, the African Union’s deployment of human rights observers, and requests to delay the election from Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta and South African President Jacob Zuma—are welcome, these actors must find the political will and increase

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resources to assist in the protection of Burundians.

Such responses—which should always prioritize the protection needs of the population—could include dispatching high-level envoys to assist in mediating a resolution to the emerging crisis; pressuring Burundi to postpone elections until the situation has stabilized; supporting the state to undertake the steps needed to hold elections in a peaceful, free and fair manner; providing assistance to ensure that perpetrators of human rights abuses are held accountable; and offering support to neighboring states hosting Burundian refugees.

History is riddled with examples of the high price populations have paid for the international community's failure to heed early warning signs of atrocities. By taking these risk factors seriously, the Government of Burundi and the international community have the chance to demonstrate that they have finally learned from the harsh lessons of Rwanda, Srebrenica, and Syria.

Background:

- In 2005, UN Member States unanimously agreed that they had a **Responsibility to Protect (RtoP)** populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing in the World Summit Outcome Document. Though the primary responsibility to protect lies with the State, the international community has a responsibility to assist States in fulfilling this obligation. When a state manifestly fails to protect its population or is in fact the perpetrator of these crimes, the international community has a responsibility to take collective action in a timely and decisive manner to prevent or halt the commission of atrocity crimes. Such action must be on a case-by-case basis using a broad range of political, economic, and humanitarian measures, and—should peaceful means prove inadequate—coercive measures, including the use of force as authorized by the Security Council and in accordance with the UN Charter.
- The **International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect** is a network of 85 civil society organizations worldwide that works to strengthen consensus for RtoP; further the understanding of the norm; push for strengthened capacities to prevent and respond to atrocity crimes; and mobilize NGOs to push for action to save lives in RtoP country-specific situations.