

Peace and Democracy in Burundi and Beyond

Pan African Nonviolence & Peace-building Network (PANPEN)



URGENT

CALL

May/June 2015 – Headlines scream of violence in the small, central African country of Burundi, with stories of those killed in recent demonstrations and conflict in the capital city and beyond, of struggles against the incumbent president pushing to stay in power after ten years when most advisors – including the Catholic Church – believe that he has completed the maximum two terms in office regulated by the Burundian constitution and the Arusha Peace Agreement that brought peace in Burundi in 2000 after a long civil war. The economy, some experts say, is on the verge of collapse, with no budget allocations for the electoral process – and, on Thursday 21 May 2015 – Belgium (Burundi’s largest trade partner) threatened to cut all aid if President Pierre Nkurunziza goes ahead with campaign for a third term in office. South Africa’s President Zuma and former President Mbeki BOTH called for adherence to the Arusha Peace Agreements of 2000. Those who understand contemporary African affairs are well aware that the current events in Burundi affect at very least the nations and peoples of Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Uganda, with peace, justice and democracy hanging in the balance as it appears that another “dark moment” is descending upon the continent.

What is not as well known – and hardly ever reported on or even taken into consideration when international analysts look to Burundi – is that the small Great Lakes nation has been a center of highly engaged nonviolent action, peace studies, and unarmed grassroots mobilization for at least the last two years. A University of Bujumbura “Cine-Club for Peace” has held weekly dialogue meetings on nonviolent social change since 2013, attracting approximately 200 weekly participants in active discussions on peaceful social change. A University of Ngozi peace studies program, part of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, has brought together professors, students and the college administration to deepen their understandings of peaceful development and work with local youth outside of formal educational structures to increase positive relationships. From Music Clubs in Gitega to Football Associations committed to nonviolence in an adjoining town, from well-connected consortiums of judges and lawyers, to countless church-based and community organizations in every corner of the country, nonviolent action has been planned for and advocated in hopes that the upcoming election – now slated for June 2015 – will proceed fairly and without increased violence.

In addition, over the past ten months, a growing number of Burundians and their allies – concerned citizens of the Congo, Rwanda, and throughout the continent – have joined together in regional

associations throughout the Diaspora. These regional groups (such as the PANPEN associate, the African Solidarity Network of Durban, South Africa) make consistent the much-needed space for further dialogue on cooperation and effective pressure points to rid the Great Lakes of corporate, governmental, and individual corruption, theft, dictatorship, inequality and injustice.

The confrontations taking place mainly in the capital city intensified after Burundi's highest court allowed President Nkurunziza to run for an additional term based on a technicality, leading to demonstrations and much anger. The situation was further fueled by an attempted coup against Nkurunziza, and extreme government backlash, dashing many hopes for a smooth transition of power. At this time, the role of the international community is most crucial – when a significant amount of additional attention, letting Burundi know that the whole world is watching, could have an effect in the days to come. Though it is difficult to know exactly what might be most effective, we urge that everyone reading this commit to at least one of the suggestions below:

- Plan a **nonviolent vigil for Friday, 5 June 2015, at 5pm** in your city or town. Select an appropriate place, and – if need be – a contact person to help spread the word. Obtain information from, and network with, local Burundian and/or African activists and scholars, and plan for slogans appropriate to your locale. We suggest that the basic theme should be **“Peace and Democracy in Burundi and the African Great Lakes.”** The goal will be to have as many vigils in different cities and towns as we can, even if they are small ones. War Resisters International Africa Support Network Coordinator Matt Meyer <MMMSRNB@igc.org>, based in New York City, will collect information on local and regional activities and work to link all localities which have a vigil, prayer session, educational event, demonstration or activity of any kind.
- Stay in touch with reliable news sources on the situation in Burundi and the region. There are many good sources of information; one US-based Friends (Quaker) group both monitors the situation and contains links to petitions and action alerts. See FCNL for more information, here: http://fcn.org/updates/burundi_on_the_brink_of_violence/
- Be ready to support local Burundian peace and justice groups when they call for concrete solidarity. A new Burundi Emergency Nonviolence Initiative, supported by many principals of the Pan African Nonviolence and Peace-building Network and managed by the George Mason School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution and their Center for Peacemaking Leadership, has been formed along just these lines – building international solidarity in the context and under the leadership of grassroots Burundian civil society organizations. Help contribute to these efforts in any way you can, and become aware of similar groups which may exist or develop in your community.
- Let human rights activists and advocates dealing with other regions of the world know about this urgent situation. Spread the word far and wide, and help link potential allies so that our networks grow, sharing best practices and supporting one another in times of need.

Africa faces the same strife, violence, injustice, and corruption as the rest of the world – and offers similar reasons for great hope, knowledge and power. As we seek African solutions to Africa's problems – always building from the bottom up – we recognize the need for a new internationalism, built on mutual respect, south-south solidarity, self-determination, peace, democracy, and an end to all war.

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