BURUNDI WOMEN AND GIRLS MOVEMENT FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

Will the African Union, the United Nations and the International Community at large hear the desperate cry of Burundi people and rescue them?

The Burundi Women and Girls Movement for Peace and Security is deeply concerned by the current developments of the situation in Burundi as information continues to flow about rebellions engaging war as a last resort to the crisis resolution. We are also concerned about the evident risk of regionalization of the crisis if nothing is done to break the escalation. The present paper is a pressing call for rescue that the women of Burundi address to the international community, especially the African Union and the United Nations as well as all the partners who have understood the urgent necessity of acting for Burundi to recover from this tragic situation. Clear signs of escalation have been so amply demonstrated on the ground to the point that the Burundi situation is known to everybody. In line of the AU Peace and Security Council No. 515 of Johannesburg on 13 June 2015, Women of Burundi are joining other forces of peace to request the immediate deployment of AU-UN independent investigation teams on the current mass violation of human rights as well as the immediate deployment of the AU Military experts to carry out the disarmament of the Imbonerakure who are terrorizing innocent civilians pushing them to exile, the majority of whom being women and children. Official figures of those who have fled to neighboring countries reach today over 150.000. We urge the international community, within the UN and AU obligation to protect all peoples in danger, to further consider carrying out an urgent military intervention to quell the violence of the Government security forces which is reaching an intolerable level. Women of Burundi, having realized that the current Government has completely failed to protect its people as it is its primary role, further recommend that a transitional government be established and the political dialogue including all the actors be initiated in order to find a consensual solution to the crisis and pave together the new direction Burundi should take in the future, in the primary interest of Burundi population and in accordance with the tenets of Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Accord of 2000.

I. Political Turmoil

Under turmoil since April 2015, the Burundi situation is taking uncontrollable dimensions. It all began by the decision of Burundi ruling party CNDD/FDD’s appointing the incumbent Head of State, H.E. Pierre Nkurunziza who has served 2 terms since 2005, to be its flag bearer in the presidential elections to take place in 2015. In their firm belief of and commitment to rule of law, and considering the relative peace brought about by the 2000 Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Accord and the 2005 Constitution which derived from it, scores of Burundians, including numerous members of leadership of the ruling party itself (i.e. the Speaker of Parliament, one Vice President of the Republic, the Spokesperson of the Party, the Spokesperson of the President, the President of the Women League, ect.), opposition parties, civil society organizations and other stakeholders, oppose the decision considered as a clear violation of the Accord and have staged peaceful demonstrations against that move. Protestors are demanding Nkurunziza to renounce to the third term which is a violation Constitution and the Arusha Peace Accord
limiting the Presidency to two terms of 5 years each. But the President's supporters state that he is eligible for a third term because for his first term, he was chosen by Parliament.

Many national, regional and international legal experts have provided an opinion on the issue, stating in clear terms that Nkurunziza's bid for a 3rd term is a flagrant violation of the Arusha Agreement and the Burundi Constitution. We can cite in this regard, the Attorney Generals and Ministers of Justice of EAC Member States, the Legal Experts of Burundi partners as well as all the eminent personalities who took part and who made it possible for the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Accord to be signed, under the clear understanding that no President of Burundi would go beyond the two terms. Reliable sources have revealed that the Constitutional Court, in its sitting in the evening of the 30th April 2015 had decided that Nkurunziza was not allowed to run for a 3rd term. But then, the President of the Court, in violation of the confidentiality of the deliberations, informed Nkurunziza of this development before the decision was made public. Members of the Court were threatened and ordered to change their ruling. It was at that juncture that the Vice-President of the Court, who refused to support this wrong decision was obliged to flee the country.

Protests and demonstrations started, especially in the Bujumbura Capital and in some other rural areas, since 26 April 2015, showing anger and total disagreement with the ruling party's decision. Public security forces, assisted by the “Imbonerakure militia”, composed of members of the ruling party youth wing used all manners of harsh and brutal means to subdue the movement against P. Nkurunziza 3rd term. In addition, these are allegedly supported by a good number of formal Rwandese Interahamwe, members of the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR).

For months now, the government has been requested to disarm the militia, but nothing is being done. It should be recalled that the use of private militia and their integration in the police and army forces are criminal offences before the Burundi law. Many voices were often raised, from the national and international community, to disapprove and condemn this criminal activity and recommendations were addressed to Burundi leaders, but no remedial measure was ever taken. Rather, it is glaring that the militia were given all means to engage in their criminal deeds as manifested by the growing number of refugees who continue to flee the country in very difficult conditions.

The international community has to take concrete measures to urgently disarm these illegal and destructive forces.

II. Public security forces brutality and absence of information

The demonstrations started in form of peaceful protests. However, the public security forces and their allies did not hesitate to use force and violence against demonstrators, even when they put their hands up. The protestors persevered despite all forms of massive human rights violations, live ammunitions, arbitrary arrests, extra judiciary executions, intimidations, destructions and ban of private independent media, etc.
The Burundi Women and Girls Movement for Peace and Security considers that this battle is a demonstration of an incredible courage of hundreds and even thousands of people who are only exercising their rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

The international community keeps issuing statements and formal condemnations. It is time to engage into concrete action to protect the desperate civilian population. As to date, killings are still going on.

There is a risk that the continuous use of force against this determination may push the demonstrators to self-defense, including by the use of guns.

As of today, it is difficult to monitor and establish the correct assessment of the situation in the absence of independent information. The very fact that private media have been destroyed and forbidden to operate makes it almost impossible to have reliable verifiable data. The rural population that is unable to use or cannot access the international and social media lives in quasi total ignorance of what the nation is going through. Furthermore, Burundi is being poisoned by rumors and all kind of information, without any possibility to establish the truth. This is a tactic chosen by the government to allow the Burundi leaders to continue committing all kinds of crimes in total impunity. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter have become primary sources of information. Unfortunately, they also contribute to the spreading of rumors whether from the government or the opposition. It is indeed difficult to monitor and establish the correct assessment in the absence of independent media and press.

The issue at hand at this stage is to know how long the Burundi population can still hold if the International community does not decide to intervene quickly to put an end to the ongoing violence.

III. The Government of Burundi to defeat peaceful demonstrations and free expression at all costs

As stated above, the East African Community (EAC), the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), the African Union Commission and Peace and Security Council, the United Nations Secretariat and Security Council, the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, the European Union as well as individual partner and friendly Member States have been actively calling Burundi leaders, opposition parties and all actors to put forward the greater interest of the nation and its citizens above their owns and give priority to the peace and security for all burundians. They have called upon them to come together and find a consensual solution to the crisis.

On July 1, 2015, as Burundi President and his team were at Stadium celebrating the Burundi 53th Anniversary of national Independence, the areas of Cibitoke and Mutakura in Bujumbura were invaded and isolated by police, military and Imbonerakure. Numerous messages calling for rescue spread all over via social media, applications such as WhatsApp, Viber, and e-mails. All the ways out of the neighborhoods were blocked, fear paralyzed the people, everyone was hiding in their houses and as a result, nobody can give an accurate account of what happened that day. Only grenades, gunshots and people screaming informed on what was going on. No media, humanitarian and human rights organizations had access to those places. It is said that armed people were going from house to house killing people and that a pickup vehicle was collecting all the bodies under the supervision of General Adolphe Nshimirimana, the former Intelligence Chief and overall coordinator of these operations.
Information has been circulating on mass graves where many people killed in this crisis are being buried. The first one is said to be located at a place called “Iwabo w’abasigaye” in Kamenge. It was then moved to the compound of “Iwabo w’abantu”, both belonging to General Adolphe Nshimirimana. This would then explain the relatively so called low number of reported casualties of July 1st, after an entire night and a half a day of shootings. Those figures are far below reality. Information from reliable sources indicates that more than 70 people were killed and buried in that mass grave. Investigations should be urgently carried out by independent bodies for justice to be done.

Generally, the strategy of closing down all independent information media adopted by the Burundi leadership has deliberately created a climate of fear and terror; due to total ignorance of the situation as well as the uncertainty of what can happen while people live in darkness. This gives an edge to the perpetrators of the attacks because without information, citizens are taken by surprise, thus vulnerable. It is for this same reason that the Government is able to keep spreading inaccurately that 99% of the territory is peaceful, just because no other source is available to verify the national radio broadcasts.

This is however contradicted by the heavy armor and security personnel around him whenever he goes out. His own fear was hardly hidden during the 53rd Independence Anniversary celebration where the stage at the stadium was built with bullet proof glasses. The same goes with the current electoral campaign tours where he is always accompanied by a great number of security agents heavily armed keeping him far away from his own people. How can one continue leading in confidence a people he is afraid of.

IV. Burundi Leadership and the crisis settlement

Throughout this time of turmoil, the Government has taken advantage of the information blackout to manipulate the public opinion into believing that what is happening at the moment is an ethnic conflict. This is a very serious act of irresponsibility and high treason against national unity on the part of current leaders of Burundi who know very well the sensitivity and the impact of such intoxication of the Burundi mindset. The United Nations Security Council and the African Union Peace and Security Council should seriously consider this case and take appropriate action before it gets too late, according to the agreed principle of “Never again”.

Today, Burundi National Police engages in armed battle against unarmed civilian groups and individuals. The very people the security forces are supposed to protect are the targets of their blind and brutal attacks. People are found in their homes, arrested, brutalized or simply executed. For instance, it is alleged that on Saturday 4th July 2015, Adolphe Nshimirimana himself, leading a group of killers, broke into the house of a peaceful family, in search of a young man presumed to have participated in demonstrations. As the young man was not found home, they shot dead his old mum and his sister.

Another recent sad case is that of two brothers, Emmanuel and Benjamin, whose bodies were found dead and tied together in the rice field on July 13th 2015. Testimonies revealed that they heard shootings during the night of 12th – 13th but were not able to go out to see what has happened by fear of being fired too. They added that the two brothers were all belonging to the same political party, MSD
and that they have always been the target of police while searching for guns hidings. But nothing has even been found in their home.

Some explain what is happening as the “neutralization of the anti-Nkurunziza movement members”, others talk about search for civilians to be disarmed, while others still speak about “extra-judiciary executions”. Whatever is happening in Burundi, it is taking a heavy toll on the population. So many people are being killed without explanations on motives and circumstances.

It is worth questioning how national institutions that are supposed to care for the people, protect them and ensure their human, moral and physical safety turn against them, threatening, killing and forcing them into exile. Indeed, the present situation raises very serious questions about the leadership of the nation. Individual interests seem to supersede the collective and national interests, and the desire to remain in power has become the leitmotiv of all decisions. All stakeholders, political actors, civil society members, women and youth organizations, religious groups, private sectors and all other actors must come together in a dialogue to agree on the vision of the nation and design the leadership that will show caring, commitment, willingness to pay the price and engage the whole Burundi population around the common ideal of peace, development and prosperity.

The current Burundi leadership has failed to understand the messages of its citizens, members of the ruling party as well as the opposition, the civil society organizations, collaborators, organizations such as the EAC, the ICGLR, the AU, the EU, the UN and individual partner states. In total disrespect and despise, the Burundi government has refused to listen to wisdom and good advice from all corners. Now, the country is falling apart and no one seems to realize it.

V. The need for intervention in Burundi

According to the internationally agreed principle of the responsibility to protect, when a state is unable or unwilling to protect its citizens, the international community must intervene. Since the beginning of the protests, so many people have lost their lives and properties in Burundi and it looks like no one is going to stop the public security forces to use force to suppress demonstrations, given the fact especially that in despair and anger, the young demonstrators have used stones and other means to protect themselves. The representatives of the government keep repeating that the security situation is good, yet they go shooting and chasing for alleged violence and other crimes perpetrators and when they find those they are looking for, most of the time, they systematically kill them.

It is time to act forcefully. An independent investigation should be carried out urgently and action taken accordingly. Once national leadership is committing violence as well as massive and gross human rights violations as it is the case in Burundi, the consent of the Government should not be required for any intervention. A State that has failed to protect its citizens does not have any sovereignty or legitimacy to put forward. Someone who lives in a neighborhood of Mutakura wrote: “These guys are ready to kill all of us and they don’t care if you are among protesters or not, armed or not. It’s just like ok, you leave in the same area with them, so....we meet you outside or at your home and we shoot, that’s it”.
As Secretary General Ban Ki Moon rightly said on April 6th 2014, “states can no longer claim that atrocity crimes are a domestic matter beyond the realm of international concern...Global leaders should do more to prevent the preventable, and to counter the cruelty taking place before their eyes. People everywhere should place themselves in the shoes of the vulnerable....and ask themselves what more they can do to build a world of human rights and dignity for all. Let us show people facing dire threats that they are not alone or abandoned – and that the lifeline they need is on its way”. This message must be delivered to Burundi while it is still time.

Surely enough, the International community intervention called forth will not solve the Burundi problem, but it will stop violence and human rights violations, thus allowing a conducive environment for dialogue and peaceful settlement of the crisis. Many partners have advocated for dialogue and consensus as the only way to reach sustainable solutions, but for dialogue to take place effectively, there must be minimum security. It is for this reason that the Burundi Women and Girls Movement for Peace and Security earnestly calls upon the African Union Peace and Security Council and the United Nations Security Council to consider a quick military intervention to stop the killings and ensure a secure environment for the population to come out of their hiding, the refugee camps and all those places where they were forced to run for security. It will then be possible to launch dialogue and organize credible election afterwards.

It goes without saying that the current situation meets all the threshold criteria for military intervention for humanitarian purposes. It is a “just cause” to secure a population that is being killed in big numbers, the intervention is of the “right intention” to protect civilian people, it is a “last resort” after all the calls for dialogue and peaceful settlement remained unheeded. It is a fact that the African Union and the United Nations have the “right authority” and will use “proportionate means” with a “reasonable prospect” to save Burundi from this man-made calamity.

The UN Security Council can use Chapter VII of the UN Charter while Article 4 of the AU Constitutive Act allows a military intervention even without Burundi government consent. Does the International community wait for additional hundreds or thousands of life losses to intervene? Do we need repetition of the 1994 Rwanda shameful disaster? It is urgent to deploy a military force to protect the civilian population and restore rule and order in Burundi before it gets too late.

CONCLUSION: A TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT TO BRING BURUNDI BACK ON TRACK

Further to all what has been developed in the present paper, the Burundi Women and Girls Movement for Peace and Security considers that the just concluded parliamentarian and local elections on June 29 2015, are in total violation of all the rules of democratic process as well as the AU PSC Decision No.515 of June 2015. Both nationally and internationally, voices were raised long before the elections took place to warn Burundi Government that conditions were not in place to ensure a peaceful, inclusive, transparent and fair elections. Ignoring all the good faith advices and wisdom opinions, the Government went ahead and organized elections that all consider as not credible. As the Government seems determined to go against all warnings to organize the presidential elections on July 21st 2015 , even
though conducive conditions are not in place, many national actors and international partners have already indicated that they will not consider the results thereof as valid.

The current government has disqualified as the right leader to bring Burundi out of the current devastating crisis. Instead of being the right institution to bring solutions, it has become the problem of Burundi. As the conflict continues, it has been realized that for one name alone to be maintained as presidential candidate, a heavy sacrifice of human lives, infrastructures, economic and social activity, as well as human rights and many other aspects of the population welfare have been continually reported. Threats of war are being heard from all corners, fear has invaded all the population, and no peace message is being heard on the public communications. There is therefore an urgent need to bring all the actors to understand the collective responsibility of ensuring that peace and security are restored in Burundi and sit around dialogue table. This dialogue should result in the establishment of the Transitional Government that will take the country through conflict resolution and effective reconciliation, peace building and peaceful, credible and inclusive elections.

*The Burundi Women and Girls Movement for peace and security is committed to remain mobilized and will allow no rest to the world until peace and security are restored in BURUNDI and development is launched.*