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Burundi: UN expert calls for protection of civic space

OTTAWA (25 October 2023) – A UN expert urged Burundi to put an end to the growing pressure on civic space and guarantee conditions for the credible return of refugees.

“As Burundi moves towards the 2025 legislative and municipal elections, I note a shrinking civic space and a growing pressure on political parties, civil society organisations and the media,” said Fortuné Gaetan Zongo, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burundi, at the end of his visit to Canada.

Zongo noted the arrest and detention in Burundi of a political party representative on 18 October 2023 who was reportedly accused of “undermining the internal security of the State” following a message he posted on “X” (formerly known as Twitter). Although he was granted provisional release on 21 October, the case highlights the risk of reprisals and restrictions on freedom of expression. The National Congress for Freedom, one of the main opposition parties, has reportedly been suspended for several months.

“The protection of independent voices is more important than ever to ensure a viable democratic space that allows criticism of governance issues without risk of reprisal,” the expert said.

He warned that offences with vague and broad definitions found in the country’s legislation were subject to a wide range of interpretations and used to violate the right to engage in legitimate political and social activities.

The Special Rapporteur cited the arrests of Floriane Irangabiye, a journalist detained since August 2022, Christophe Sahabo, former Director of a hospital, and Christopher Nduwayo, National Secretary and member of the Political Bureau of the “Congrès National pour la Liberté”, as prime examples.

“Burundi’s relentless prosecution of human rights defenders contravenes the country’s international human rights obligations and falls short of the expectation to uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights in its capacity as a member of the Human Rights Council,” Zongo said.

He noted that the Public Prosecutor’s Office appealed on 23 May 2023 the case of Sonia Ndikumasabo, Marie Emerusabe, Audace Havyarimana, Sylvana Inamahoro and Prosper Runyange – five human rights defenders arrested by the National Intelligence Service in February 2023 on charges of undermining the internal security of the State, rebellion, charges related to their work as human rights defenders and their collaboration with Avocats Sans Frontières. Some of them were acquitted by the Tribunal de Grande Instance of Ntahangwa on 28 April 2023 while others were given suspended sentences.

“The country is depriving itself of human resources by keeping part of its population in exile,” the expert said.

He noted the lack of essential components of a voluntary repatriation process, with a mechanism for physical, legal and material protection and the absence of harmonised principles for managing land issues of returnees, which could undermine the peaceful cohabitation between the different segments of the population.

“Burundi needs to redouble its efforts to promote national reconciliation, social cohesion and sustainable peace and development,” Zongo said.

The Special Rapporteur will present his annual report to the UN General Assembly on 25 October 2023.

Mr **Fortuné Gaétan Zongo** (Burkina Faso) is the [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burundi](#). The UN Human Rights Council appointed him to this mandate on 1 April 2022 at the end of its 49th session. He will present his report to the fifty-fourth session of the Human Rights Council and to the United Nations General Assembly at its seventy-eighth session.

UN expert calls on the government to stop exerting pressure on political parties, civil society organisations and the media

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