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# A First Step Toward Reform: Ending Burundi's Forced Contribution System

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**What's new?\*** In 2017, Burundi's government imposed an ostensibly voluntary contribution scheme on its citizens to fund the country's May 2020 elections. But the ruling party has collected the contributions coercively, has not made clear how it is using the funds, and continues to demand payments months after declaring the practice over.

**Why does it matter?** As Burundians chafe under the pressure of political repression, this confiscatory and arbitrarily administered system of forced contributions can only increase public resentment, and hence the risk of violence, in the run-up to the 2020 elections – and potentially thereafter.

**What should be done?** International partners should pressure the Burundian authorities to end permanently the collection of forced contributions of money and goods, do a public accounting of how funds collected for the election were spent, prosecute perpetrators of serious abuse and embezzlement, and launch a conversation about human rights and governance reforms.

*\* Crisis Group conducted the field work for this briefing before the COVID-19 pandemic. Some dynamics examined in this publication may have changed in the meantime. Moving forward, we will be factoring the impact of the pandemic into our research and recommendations, as well as offering dedicated coverage of how the outbreak is affecting conflicts around the world.*

## I. Overview

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As Burundi's government has escalated political repression, it has also squeezed the country's exhausted citizenry for material support. Since 2017, it has been extorting "contributions" from the Burundian people, ostensibly to fund the May 2020 elections. The government officially ended the contribution scheme in the summer of 2019, but the Imbonerakure youth militia continues to collect money and goods. Although the ruling party has chosen a new candidate for the elections, indicating that President Pierre Nkurunziza will leave office after a controversial third term, pre-election tensions are still running high. Burundi's leaders could reduce the chances of trouble ahead of the polls and start to repair relations with external part-

ners by stopping the practice of forced contributions for good, sharing information about the use of funds, and investigating (and where appropriate prosecuting) the main offenders in channelling monies away from election preparations. Broader reforms will remain critical but ending these contributions and associated measures could be a confidence-building first step in that direction.

Nkurunziza's third-term bid in 2015 prompted street protests, a failed coup attempt, a violent crackdown and a prolonged period of political and economic instability in Burundi. Five years later, despite government efforts to portray the country as stabilising and returning to normal, it is anything but. The government continues to deny civil society the ability to operate freely and uses intimidation and violence against the political opposition. In the run-up to the May 2020 presidential, legislative and district council elections, the regime has cracked down on supporters of the main opposition party, the Congrès national pour la liberté (CNL), and other perceived dissenters. The Imbonerakure ruling-party youth militia, which acts with impunity, is the main tool of this campaign of repression.

Against this backdrop, the government's heavy-handed collection since 2017 of ostensibly "voluntary" contributions to fund the upcoming election is yet another hardship the Burundian people have been required to bear. The Imbonerakure, working with a range of government and security services, intimidated and harassed people into paying amid ongoing reports of embezzlement and indications that the militia is becoming increasingly dependent on financing itself in this manner. By heaping financial pressure on Burundi's already exhausted population and straining the country's creaking economy further, the contributions system could only ratchet up political tensions in a country that has yet to recover fully from the shocks of 2015.

The Burundian authorities optimally would make the human rights and governance reforms that international partners have been demanding as a prerequisite for restoring aid to the government severed in the aftermath of the 2015 violence. But, realistically, they will not do so in the handful of weeks between now and the elections, so Bujumbura's international interlocutors should focus on the more modest goal of prevailing on Burundian officials and candidates to: commit to ending all schemes for the forced contribution of money and goods in any context outside the formal tax system; come clean with the public about how the proceeds collected for the elections were spent; and ask the police to investigate those suspected of serious embezzlement and human rights abuses in the course of collections so that they can be brought to justice.

Evariste Ndayishimiye, the presidential candidate for the ruling Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie – Forces pour la défense de la démocratie (CNDD-FDD), has shown signs of wanting to mend ties with international actors. Burundi's outside partners should encourage Ndayishimiye to make this set of modest commitments with respect to forced contributions as a prelude of sorts to the reform agenda they would like to see him pursue.

The road to broader reform will remain long and difficult. But taking these steps with respect to forced contributions would be a good way to demonstrate that Burundi's present and future leaders are at least serious about moving in the right direction.

## II. The Continuing Fallout of the 2015 Crisis

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In April 2015, President Nkurunziza's controversial decision to run for a third term helped kick Burundi into a state of protracted crisis. Protests filled the streets, and state authorities aided by the brutal Imbonerakure youth militia cracked down on civil society and private citizens. The country's senior army ranks split and several former close allies of Nkurunziza led a failed coup attempt in May of that year.<sup>1</sup>

The repression that surged in 2015 has continued since and the country's human rights situation has deteriorated again in the run-up to the 2020 elections. The jittery government in Bujumbura has continued to use state security services and the Imbonerakure to maintain its hold on power by cracking down on the political opposition, many of whose members have been attacked, arbitrarily arrested, summarily executed or disappeared.<sup>2</sup> A UN Commission of Inquiry found that the pattern of abuse appeared to be "intensifying in the run up to the 2020 presidential and legislative elections", identifying the Imbonerakure as the main perpetrator, and political opponents of the regime (especially CNL supporters), as the main victims.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the Burundian authorities have mounted a steady campaign of repression against independent voices that might report on its abusive activities to the public. In February 2019, the government forced the closure of the UN Human Rights Office in Burundi.<sup>4</sup> In March 2019, Bujumbura permanently revoked the BBC's operating licence and upheld a previous suspension of Voice of America's operations. In June, the government shut down Parcem, one of the last human rights advocacy groups operating in Burundi.<sup>5</sup> Four journalists at Iwacu, one of Burundi's few remaining independent media outlets, were arrested in October while reporting on clashes in Bubanza province. At the beginning of 2020, they received sentences of two and a half years in prison.<sup>6</sup>

Outside efforts to help Burundi heal the wounds that opened in 2015 have been largely ineffective.<sup>7</sup> An inter-Burundian dialogue between the government and both domestically based and exiled opposition figures, led for three years by the East African Community (EAC) with Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni as chief mediator and former Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa as facilitator, failed. The dialogue ground to a halt in 2019, due in no small part to the EAC's internal divisions, and in

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<sup>1</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°111, *Burundi: Peace Sacrificed?*, 29 May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See "Burundi: Rampant Abuses Against Opposition", Human Rights Watch, 12 June 2019.

<sup>3</sup> "Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Burundi", UN Human Rights Council, UN General Assembly Document A/HRC/42/49, 6 August 2019. The Council based its findings on interviews with more than 300 people in Burundi and Burundians living in third countries, to add to the more than 1,000 testimonies it had already collected.

<sup>4</sup> Bujumbura had been withholding cooperation with the Office since the publication of a critical report commissioned by the UN Human Rights Council in 2016. See "UN Human Rights Office in Burundi Closes", Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, press release, 5 March 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Mednick, "Fears of New Atrocities Rise in Burundi as Nkurunziza Ratchets Up His Repression", *World Politics Review*, 6 September 2019.

<sup>6</sup> "Les 4 journalistes d'Iwacu condamnés pour 'tentative impossible' à 2 ans et 6 mois de prison", Iwacu, 30 January 2020.

<sup>7</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Report N°278, *Running Out of Options in Burundi*, 20 June 2019; and Elissa Jobson and Nelleke van de Walle, "AU heads of state summit needs to whip Nkurunziza back into line", *The East African*, 10 July 2019.

its wake few countries in the region seem willing or able to influence Bujumbura through bilateral channels. Diplomats and other observers underscore Nkurunziza's insularity: he hardly leaves the country and frequently refuses to meet foreign emissaries.<sup>8</sup> Michel Kafando, the UN special envoy for Burundi who resigned in October 2019, met with Nkurunziza just once during his two-and-a-half-year term.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Burundian diplomats try to convince their counterparts that all is well in the country.<sup>10</sup>

But even as it works to wall itself off from scrutiny, Bujumbura's failure to face the damage created by years of crisis and repression, much less begin repairing it, has come at a financial cost. For one thing, following the events of 2015, the EU (Burundi's largest donor) suspended direct financial support to the Burundian authorities in keeping with Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement (2000), which creates a mechanism for pausing bilateral development assistance if a party fails to respect certain obligations with respect to human rights, democracy and the rule of law.<sup>11</sup> Other major donors such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland also suspended their bilateral direct support to the government, although they (like the EU) have continued to support non-governmental partners and international organisations such as the UN providing goods and services directly to the Burundian people.<sup>12</sup>

The lack of donor support has negative social knock-on effects, for instance leaving an already weak healthcare system even worse off. Although the country so far reports only three COVID-19 cases, whether because of a lack of testing and reporting or because its relative insularity has provided a measure of protection from the pandemic, it would have no meaningful resources to deal with any significant outbreak.<sup>13</sup>

The 2015 crisis also affected Burundi's economy badly. It shattered investor confidence, and many Burundians complain that their standard of living has slipped noticeably in the intervening years.<sup>14</sup> According to the World Bank, Burundi's annual growth rate fell from a 4.2 per cent average between 2004 and 2014 to -3.9 per cent in 2015 and -0.6 per cent in 2016.

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<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Burundian government official, July 2019; Burundian independent researcher, November 2019; and Bujumbura-based diplomat, November 2019. Crisis Group interview, UN diplomat, New York, November 2019.

<sup>9</sup> It is unclear whether Kafando left his post because he had reached the end of his political mandate or because he lacked the political influence that he needed to be effective. "La situation au Burundi demeure tendue, selon Michel Kafando qui quitte son poste d'envoyé de l'ONU", ONU Info, 30 October 2019. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats at the UN, New York, June 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Tweet by Albert Shingiro, @AShingiro, Burundian permanent representative to the UN in New York, 10:34am, 29 January 2020; Crisis Group interviews, diplomats at the UN, New York, June-December 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Council Decision (EU) 2016/394 of 14 March 2016 concerning the conclusion of consultations with the Republic of Burundi under Article 96 of the Partnership Agreement between the members of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, of the one part, and the European Community and its Member States, of the other part.

<sup>12</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Report N°264, *Helping the Burundian People Cope with the Economic Crisis*, 31 August 2018.

<sup>13</sup> "Burundi records three cases of coronavirus", *The East African*, 3 April 2020.

<sup>14</sup> For example, government salaries have not increased in line with rising inflation, representing a blow to civil servants who since January 2016 also no longer receive their traditional end-of-year bonuses, the so-called *annales*. See "RIP annales et primes!", Iwacu, 20 March 2016. See also Crisis Group Report, *Helping the Burundian People Cope with the Economic Crisis*, op. cit.

Since then, better coffee and tea harvests have allowed a slight recovery (with 0.5 per cent growth in 2017 and 1.6 per cent in 2018), but the country remains far from pre-2015 rates.<sup>15</sup> In December 2019, the Iwacu media outlet reported that the government had almost depleted its foreign currency reserves.<sup>16</sup> Consistent with Iwacu's story, the central bank's reports show that foreign reserves have declined significantly since 2015, leaving the country unable to respond effectively to fluctuations in the foreign exchange market.<sup>17</sup> While as of publication the official dollar exchange rate has not changed all that much since 2015 (it is now at around 1,800 Burundian francs to one dollar compared to 1,600 francs in 2015) the black-market rate reflects a much higher price between 2,700 and 2,850 francs to one dollar.<sup>18</sup>

In the context of declining resources, Nkurunziza decided in 2017 to turn to the population to increase revenues through a scheme of ostensibly voluntary contributions. The pretext for seeking this funding was to prepare for the May 2020 elections, in which CNDD-FDD secretary general Ndayishimiye's main competition will come from long-time opposition leader Agathon Rwasa of the CNL. But in reality, the contributions are also used to reward supporters and fund the Imbonerakure. Combined with precarious economic conditions and wider political repression, the funding scheme contributes to the immiseration of the already struggling Burundian people. While on their own these contributions are unlikely to lead to widespread violence (although some people have resisted the collections at local level) they can only increase internal tensions, and even some Burundian government officials fear that they are alienating and angering the population further.<sup>19</sup>

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### III. Contributions and Repression

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#### A. *A History of Public Contributions and Government Control*

Although its recent reintroduction has created significant social and political tensions, the government's reliance on so-called voluntary contributions and other ad hoc measures to fill resource gaps is not new to Burundi.

The practice dates back at least two decades. In the late 1990s – during the Burundian civil war (1993-2005) – the Tutsi-led government looked to ostensibly voluntary contributions from the population to support its war efforts. Burundians were asked to pay 5 per cent of their salaries to defray military costs, including rations and equipment. During roughly the same period, the CNDD-FDD, which was the most significant Hutu rebel group before it became Burundi's ruling party, also relied on the population to supply material support, demanding that each peasant family con-

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<sup>15</sup> See the Burundi Country Profile on the World Bank website.

<sup>16</sup> "La chute persistante des devises inquiète", Iwacu, 16 December 2019.

<sup>17</sup> According to the Bank of the Republic of Burundi's 2018 annual report, published on 22 November 2019, official reserves have decreased by 10.9 per cent in 2018 compared to 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Burundian student, Nairobi and Burundian journalist, Brussels, February 2020; Crisis Group telephone interview, political analyst, Bujumbura, March 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Burundian official, October 2019. The official stated: "The fact that they keep doing this is not good for us. It makes the population angry ... at CNDD-FDD".



tribute a fixed amount of food. In refugee camps in Tanzania, where Hutu rebel groups held sway, Hutu families donated beans, maize or livestock.<sup>20</sup>

These contribution schemes did not end with the war, however. Once in government, President Nkurunziza and the CNDD-FDD continued to squeeze material support from the population outside the formal tax system. For example, in 2006, Nkurunziza introduced an obligatory community public works scheme, which required neighbourhoods to contribute to physically cleaning, constructing and maintaining public spaces and CNDD-FDD provincial headquarters.<sup>21</sup> Public-sector workers had their pay docked to ensure their contributions, with the funds often directed to the party. The scheme also required companies to contribute in kind, for instance by donating bags of cement for construction.<sup>22</sup> While mass participation schemes involving cleaning towns and building basic infrastructure are common in many countries in the region, the coercive and partisan nature of the CNDD-FDD's approach reinforced political tensions and polarisation.

The 2013 modernisation of the formal tax system (including the development of a tax code ) enabled Burundi to collect up to 80 per cent of the state's recurring expenditures through it, but the informal system of contributions to the ruling party, which consolidated government control over patronage sources, was never dismantled.<sup>23</sup> To reinforce its grip on informal financial flows, the government began in 2015 to require every head of household to enter the personal details of all family members, household employees and even visitors passing through in a logbook known as a *cahier de ménage*. The authorities printed the logs and obliged people to buy the mandatory record book from local administrators for 2,000 francs. Despite the absence of any law stipulating this obligation (much less laying out penalties for non-compliance), police and Imbonerakure now use the logbook as an auditing tool as they move through households to check for compliance with the obligation to register personal details in the book, arbitrarily arresting or fining offenders, as well as collecting contributions.<sup>24</sup>

Over time, the CNDD-FDD has become increasingly creative in how it raises funds. For example, it has turned for contributions to the associations of “*taxi-motos*” and “*taxi-vélos*” (motorcycle and bicycle taxis), which offer the CNDD-FDD and Imbonerakure a large pool of individuals who can easily be identified and thus tapped for

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<sup>20</sup> Willy Nindorera, “The CNDD-FDD in Burundi: The Path from Armed to Political Struggle”, Berghof Transitions Series N°10, 2012, p. 18; Crisis Group interview, Burundian opposition member, Nairobi, July 2019.

<sup>21</sup> The UN Commission of Inquiry notes that these practices have continued into its current reporting cycle, stating that “the people are also forced, without any legal grounds, to make regular contributions of various sorts, including to finance the construction of local offices of the ruling party, CNDD-FDD”.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interview, Bujumbura-based professor, Nairobi, July 2019.

<sup>23</sup> “Collecting tax in Africa: Above the table”, *The Economist*, 13 June 2014. On 26 December 2019, during a public broadcast in Gitega province, President Nkurunziza stressed Burundi's financial autonomy, pointing out that nearly 90 per cent of the state budget comes from domestic revenue.

<sup>24</sup> See “Rapport sur la gouvernance et les droits socio-économiques au Burundi”, Forum pour le renforcement de la société civile (FORSC), July 2019, pp. 9-12. Crisis Group interviews, member of a Burundian NGO, July 2019; Burundian student, January 2020.

revenue generation.<sup>25</sup> Rural citizens lacking cash, meanwhile, are often expected to give livestock to President Nkurunziza himself.<sup>26</sup>

### B. “Voluntary” Contributions and the 2020 Elections

In July 2017, on the 55th anniversary of Burundi's independence, President Nkurunziza announced that the government would begin collecting funds on a voluntary basis to cover the cost of holding national elections in 2020. He did not specify how much would be required.<sup>27</sup> As if to make clear that he saw the contributions as a civic duty that applied to all Burundians, he publicly deposited five million Burundian francs (about \$2,700 at the official rate), seemingly of his own money, in an account opened for the occasion at the central bank. Nkurunziza has contributed three more times since.<sup>28</sup> A year later, in June 2018, Burundi's finance minister stated that 8.9 billion Burundian francs (\$4.5 million) had been collected from the population.<sup>29</sup>

The scheme to raise money was formalised through a joint decree signed by the finance and interior ministries on 11 December 2017. It defined three categories of “contributors”: “unsalaried citizens”, “civil servants” and “others”.<sup>30</sup>

Yet both the decree's text and the government's messages about it sent mixed signals about how voluntary the contributions truly are. On one hand, the decree did not, on its face, require “unsalaried citizens” to make contributions. It said they are “not compulsory”. With regard to “others”, the December 2017 decree encouraged but did not appear to require donations, saying those in this category should be governed according to “their own will and their patriotic sense”.<sup>31</sup> On some occasions, government officials characterised *all* contributions under the decree as voluntary.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, the decree contains clues that the scheme it creates would not be fully voluntary. For example, the text specified an annual amount for unsalaried citizens of 2,000 francs (\$1) per household and 1,000 francs per child who will be old enough to vote in 2020. Moreover, the decree required civil servants to contribute a

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<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group Interview, Burundi-based university lecturer, July 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group Interview, Burundian journalist, Kigali, June 2019. See also “Nkurunziza's legacy: A country too proud to ask for needed help”, *The East African*, 7 July 2019.

<sup>27</sup> According to the finance ministry, the budget for the elections is estimated at 70 billion Burundian francs (about \$37 million). This figure is in line with what the 2015 elections required. Then, the UN Development Programme budgeted almost \$43 million.

<sup>28</sup> “Le chef de l'état dépose pour la 4ème fois sa contribution aux élections”, Presidency of the Republic of Burundi, 6 March 2019.

<sup>29</sup> “Elections 2020 : plus de 17 milliards déjà collectés sur un objectif de 70 milliards de Fbu”, Iwacu, 6 June 2018.

<sup>30</sup> The decree defines the first two categories as follows: 1) unsalaried citizens are those who live off agriculture or simple professions that generate no monthly income; 2) civil servants are persons who exercise a public or para-public position, notably parliamentarians, members of government, Burundian diplomats, members of the defence and security forces, and magistrates. The third category, “others”, is not specified in the decree, but the website of the Burundian government states that it consists of “legal or natural persons, in particular businesses, companies, associations [and] economic operators as well as others”.

<sup>31</sup> Ordonnance Ministérielle Conjointe N°530/540/1772 du 11/12/2017 portant sur les modalités de collecte de la contribution de la population aux élections de 2020, Republic of Burundi.

<sup>32</sup> “Nkurunziza lance une levée des fonds pour 2020”, Iwacu, 10 July 2017; “Elections 2020 : contributions polémiques”, Iwacu, 14 August 2017.



percentage of their salaries on a sliding scale, obliging those receiving a higher salary to contribute more and fixing the maximum annual contribution at the equivalent of a month's salary per year.<sup>33</sup>

To most Burundians, contributions on this scale are no small burden. A teacher's minimum base monthly salary is 17,722 francs, or about \$10.<sup>34</sup> More burdensome still is that some civil servants have seen contributions docked from their pay even as they have been strong-armed into paying household contributions.<sup>35</sup> Yet officials have attempted to play down the hardship this deduction represents. A senior Burundian government official told Crisis Group that he did not consider the contributions an imposition on the population at all, saying, "It's just one less beer they can buy".<sup>36</sup>

### C. *Pressure and Resistance*

Despite the government's claims that for some or all contributors, payments are supposed to be voluntary, many Burundians have paid the contributions because authorities come down hard on those who refuse to do so.<sup>37</sup> Burundians whom Crisis Group interviewed described what appears to have been the standard method for collection in the period following the decree's issuance. Someone from the police or local government would come directly to the homes of citizens to collect the contributions, accompanied by the Imbonerakure. The militia would intimidate citizens who did not wish to pay, or who were unable to pay, sometimes resorting to violence. Some Burundians who refused to pay faced incarceration. In some cases, contributors received receipts, but in others they did not.<sup>38</sup>

For those who either managed to elude the threats and abuse and did not pay, or who did pay and failed to receive a receipt, there were often consequences. Some were denied public services like health care and the registration of marriages or births.<sup>39</sup> Children from families accused of not paying were also refused access to school, until Education Minister Janvier Ndirahisha halted this practice in February 2019.<sup>40</sup> There are widespread accounts of citizens who could only shop at local markets once they showed a receipt to the Imbonerakure at entry. If they failed to do

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<sup>33</sup> Ordonnance Ministérielle Conjointe N°530/540/1772 du 11/12/2017.

<sup>34</sup> "Le salaire minimum au Burundi : une référence qui ne réjouit plus les concernés", *Burundi Eco*, 8 December 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interview, former CNDD-FDD insider, Kigali, June 2019. See also "We Let Our Children Go Hungry to Pay: Abuses Related to the 2020 Election Levy in Burundi", Human Rights Watch, 6 December 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interview, Burundian senior government official, October 2019.

<sup>37</sup> "A Façade of Peace in a Land of Fear: Behind Burundi's Human Rights Crisis", Burundi Human Rights Initiative, January 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Burundian civil society organisations and journalists, Kigali, June 2019. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Burundians in country, July and August 2019; Burundian academics, Nairobi, July 2019. See also "We Let Our Children Go Hungry to Pay", Human Rights Watch, op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Burundian diaspora, June 2019. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi also states that the "Imbonerakure do not shy away from resorting to violence and threats", and that those who do not pay are "subjected to ill treatment or deprived of access to public services".

<sup>40</sup> Correspondance 6620/CAB/DGEFFFGP/793/2019 Ministre de l'Education, de la Formation technique et professionnelle, 9 February 2019.

so, the militia members demanded payment on the spot.<sup>41</sup> Questioning the system could also put a person in peril. In July, a member of the opposition party CNL was arrested in the Kayogoro commune, in southern Burundi, for asking the Imbonerakure collecting the funds what the money would be used for.<sup>42</sup>

Beyond the reports of coercion, several other features have contributed to a public sense that the contributions scheme is arbitrarily administered. Those collecting the payments seemed to circle back for more as often as they wanted, according to Burundians Crisis Group spoke to. As noted, collectors sometimes (but not always) gave out receipts, but while these offered a measure of protection against being forced to contribute twice, they did not guarantee it.<sup>43</sup> The likelihood that families would be solicited more than once could only increase when, in March 2019, the interior minister launched a competition between various communes to collect as many contributions as possible, with the commune collecting the highest amount to be honoured by a personal visit from President Nkurunziza.<sup>44</sup> A Burundian human rights activist reported that families are sometimes assessed fees for children simply because a child appears to be old enough to vote in the forthcoming election, even though they have paperwork to prove that the child will still be underage and therefore should be exempt from the contribution scheme.<sup>45</sup>

A lack of transparency about what happens with collected funds once they pass into government hands has also undermined public confidence in the legitimacy of the contributions scheme. Nkurunziza never specified how much would be required to fund the 2020 elections. The president and finance minister did announce occasionally how much had been raised and in July 2019 declared that more than 90 per cent of the electoral budget had been covered.<sup>46</sup> But the government has released no breakdown of receipts nor any information about how the funds are spent, raising questions about the reliability of its figures, particularly against the backdrop of long-standing concerns about CNDD-FDD capture of tax revenues.<sup>47</sup> Law enforcement efforts directed at several lower-level officials for embezzling collected funds have been insufficient to bolster public trust.<sup>48</sup> A senior Burundian official acknowledged

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<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interview, Burundi-based university lecturer, July 2019. See also “We Let Our Children Go Hungry to Pay”, *op. cit.*

<sup>42</sup> “Politique : des contributions forcées pour financer la campagne du CNDD-FDD”, SOS Médias, 22 July 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Burundian academics and student, Nairobi, July 2019 and January 2020. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Burundian in country, July and August 2019; Burundian political analyst, January 2020.

<sup>44</sup> “Elections 2020 : une compétition communale, demain ce sera quoi ?”, Iwacu, 20 March 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, Kigali, June 2019.

<sup>46</sup> “Over BIF 2 billion collected as contribution to 2020 elections”, Africa Business News, 26 March 2018; “End of unpopular contributions on elections eve”, Iwacu, 8 July 2019.

<sup>47</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Report N°185, *Burundi: A Deepening Corruption Crisis*, 21 March 2012, for a historical record of CNDD-FDD attempts to capture public revenues. See also Guillaume Nicaise, “Local Power Dynamics and Petty Corruption in Burundi”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2019). A month before the 2015 vote, and after donors had pulled support, Nkurunziza also asked Burundians via Facebook and radio to contribute to the electoral budget. It is unclear from the Independent Electoral Commission’s final report whether the government raised any money this way.

<sup>48</sup> According to one Burundian journalist, “Only the small fish get caught, never the big one”, summarising a widely held view that senior CNDD-FDD officials are never held accountable for money

the lack of clarity about how funds were spent and admitted to some accounts of abuse at the local level but did not acknowledge systematic abuse in the collection or handling of contributions.<sup>49</sup>

#### D. *Continued Collections*

As a formal matter, the elections-linked contributions mechanism has now expired. On 1 July 2019, Burundi's independence day, Nkurunziza announced that he was suspending collections, stating that more than 90 per cent of the electoral budget had been covered and that the government would take care of the rest. A joint ruling by the finance and interior ministers of 12 August confirmed the suspension.<sup>50</sup>

But reality has lagged behind these announcements. With respect to elections, those who still want to contribute or have yet done so are still being asked to make payments. Collections are being made in a less systematic way and on a less wide-spread scale, but they persist. People refusing to pay or criticising the collection continue to face threats.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, the government has inaugurated other collection schemes. Imbonerakure and party officials intimidate Burundians into contributing to the construction of government and ruling-party offices and the celebration of specific days, such as Imbonerakure Day on 17 August 2019 and International Teacher's Day on 11 October.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, with the nomination of Evariste Ndayishimiye as the CNDD-FDD's candidate to take Nkurunziza's place, the practice seems to have gained new momentum.<sup>53</sup> In January 2020, Imbonerakure and local chiefs went door to door in the Gitega province to force Burundians to contribute 500 francs (\$0,26) to the smooth running of a collective prayer at an event organised by the ruling party, where the

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that passes through their hands, whether formally collected state taxes or contributions. Crisis Group interview, Burundian journalist, June 2019. See, for example, "Probable détournement des contributions destinées aux élections", SOS Médias, 31 March 2019; "Burundi : Des contributions aux élections en voie de détournement", Isangiro, 1 April 2019; and "Burundi : Les nouvelles de chez nous de ce 6 Mai 2019", RPA, 6 May 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Burundian government official, October 2019. During the interview, the official asked Crisis Group researchers for ways to improve the transparency of government spending.

<sup>50</sup> Ordonnance ministérielle conjointe N°530/540/1554 du 12/8/2019 portant sur l'arrêt de la collecte de contribution de la population aux élections de 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, human rights activists, July 2019; Burundian anti-corruption organisation staffer, August 2019; Burundian political analyst, January 2020. Crisis Group interviews, Burundian diaspora and Western diplomat, Brussels, February 2020. "Burundi : Le CNDD-FDD organise un week-end de collecte forcée des contributions aux élections de 2020", FORSC, 23 July 2019. See also "Des Contributions Forcées Pour Financer La Campagne du CNDD-FDD", SOS Médias Burundi, 22 July 2019; and "Annual Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Burundi in 2019: In the Run-up to the Elections, Political Tensions and Violence", SOS Torture Burundi, March 2020, p. 34.

<sup>52</sup> "A Façade of Peace in a Land of Fear", Burundi Human Rights Initiative, op. cit., pp. 78-83. See also "Burundi : le personnel de l'administration communale dénonce des contributions forcées", SOS Médias Burundi, 4 October 2019; and "Rumonge : des enseignants dénoncent une contribution forcée pour fêter la journée internationale de l'enseignant", SOS Médias Burundi, 11 October 2019.

<sup>53</sup> "Rapport sur la gouvernance et les droits socio-économiques au Burundi : le candidat du parti CNDD-FDD aux présidentielles, Evariste Ndayishimiye spolie la population lors de ses tournées en provinces", FORSC, February 2020.

party also announced Ndayishimiye's nomination. People in Bujumbura contributed 1,500 francs (\$0,76) and food for the same event with the Imbonerakure overseeing the collection.<sup>54</sup> Ndayishimiye also asks visitors for a contribution in cash and in kind when they come to see him, building on Nkurunziza's custom of demanding donations when travelling to the provinces. Both party members and non-members have to contribute.<sup>55</sup>

#### **IV. How to End Contributions Ahead of Elections**

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The Burundian government now seems likely to press ahead with elections in May 2020. As noted above, the CNDD-FDD has agreed on a replacement for Nkurunziza, and Burundian diplomats have worked to persuade other countries that the internal situation is stable enough for the elections to proceed.<sup>56</sup> The government is going ahead despite ongoing concerns over human rights abuses and restrictions of political space expressed by opponents, human rights groups and the UN Commission of Inquiry.<sup>57</sup> In February, the EAC announced it is set to deploy an election observer mission, but no details have emerged since.<sup>58</sup>

While unfortunately it is likely that the climate of political repression will continue between now and May, there may be an opportunity for an incremental step forward. Ndayishimiye has indicated a desire to take Burundi in a less insular direction and repair relations with international partners, including Western powers, which are concerned about human rights abuses and restricted political space.<sup>59</sup> He and the ruling CNDD-FDD party therefore have an incentive to show at least some positive movement away from the repressive systems that his administration has created. As a further benefit, such movement could provide small but significant reductions in social and political tensions in advance of what could be turbulent elections.

Although, as noted, candidate Ndayishimiye has already shown an affinity for forced contributions, it is worth testing whether he could be persuaded to change. A meaningful set of commitments might start with a pledge to enact a prohibition on the collection of forced contributions of money or goods outside the formal tax sys-

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<sup>54</sup> "Rapport sur la gouvernance et les droits socio-économiques au Burundi", FORSC, January 2020, pp. 12-13.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Burundian diaspora and Western diplomat, Brussels, February 2020. See also "La population de makamba forcée à contribuer pour accueillir le candidat du cndd-fdd aux présidentielles de mai", SOS Médias Burundi, 15 February 2020; and "Les habitants de Giteranyi sont contre les contributions forcées pour accueillir Evariste Ndayishimiye", Radio Publique Africaine, no date.

<sup>56</sup> Tweet by Albert Shingiro, @AShingiro, Burundian permanent representative to the UN in New York, 10:34 am, 29 January 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group has previously recommended that international actors, led by senior African individuals with a mandate from the African Union, and with wider international support, engage with the Burundian government to address these issues, both before and after the elections. Crisis Group Africa Report, *Running out of Options in Burundi*, op. cit.

<sup>58</sup> Tweet by East African Community, @jumuiya, 7:30 pm, 8 February 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interviews, UN diplomat, New York, November 2019; senior Burundian government official, January 2020; Burundian student, February 2020; UN diplomat, New York, February 2020; Western diplomat, Brussels, February 2020.

tem, whether for electoral preparations or any other purpose. (This prohibition would not apply to genuinely voluntary and non-partisan collective public works projects.) These commitments should also include a pledge to make a credible public accounting of how funds already collected for election purposes have been used; and where appropriate prosecute officials and militia members who, in the context of implementing the election contributions scheme, were involved in egregious human rights abuses or acts of embezzlement.

Crisis Group's conversations with senior Burundian officials indicate that they may be open to at least some of these ideas.<sup>60</sup> Where there is receptivity, donors could offer technical assistance with implementation.

This is not to say that international partners should drop wider concerns about political repression, either before or after elections. But addressing the issue of forced contributions in all the contexts where they may arise could be a credible confidence-building measure that would make it easier for Burundian authorities and external partners to start a conversation about the rights and governance reforms that will be needed to bring about actual peace and stability in this still troubled country.

## **V. Conclusion**

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The "voluntary" contributions that the Burundian authorities have looked to since 2017 to fund the organisation of the 2020 elections have fed the exhaustion, anger and resentment of the already impoverished population. Despite officially halting the contributions scheme in July 2019, government officials and the Imbonerakure youth militia continue to extort contributions. To help dial down tensions in the run-up to the elections in May, and set the stage for constructive engagement after they take place, international partners should urge the current administration and the CNDD-FDD's candidate, Ndayishimiye, to bring these and all forced contributions to a real and final halt while pledging to provide clarity on how the funds were spent and investigate those involved in embezzlement. Progress on this limited but important front could be the first step toward the kind of changes that will be required to bring donors back into the fold and help create the stability that Burundi requires for stronger economic growth and a more peaceful future.

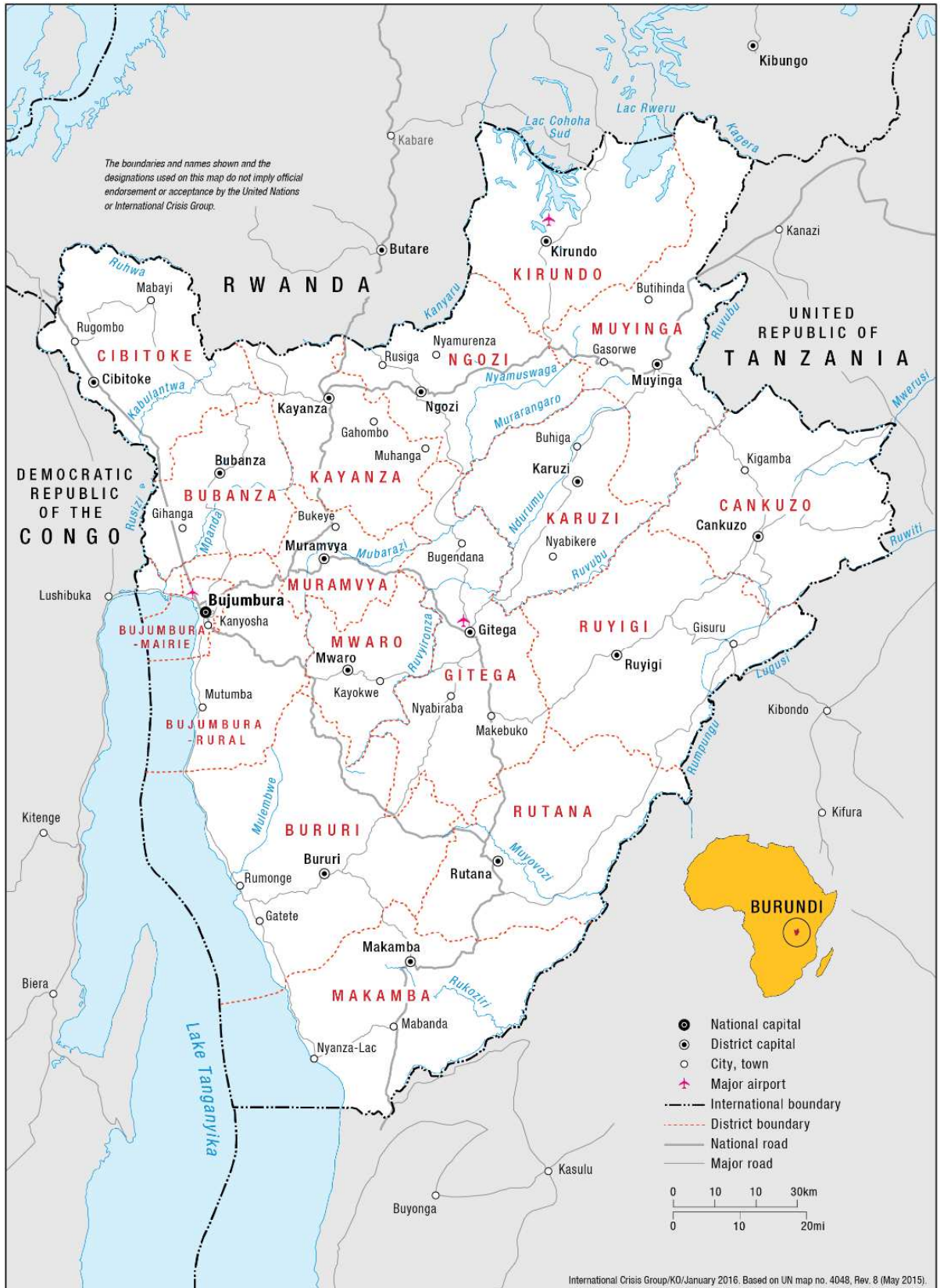
**Nairobi/Brussels, 8 April 2020**

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<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Burundian government officials, October 2019 and January 2020.



Appendix A: Map of Burundi





## Appendix B: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2017

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### Special Reports and Briefings

*Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

*Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

*Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020*, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

*Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative*, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

*COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch*, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

### Africa

*A Tale of Two Councils: Strengthening AU-UN Cooperation*, Africa Report N°279, 25 June 2019.

*The Price of Peace: Securing UN Financing for AU Peace Operations*, Africa Report N°286, 31 January 2020.

*Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2020*, Africa Briefing N°151, 7 February 2020 (also available in French).

### Central Africa

*Fighting Boko Haram in Chad: Beyond Military Measures*, Africa Report N°246, 8 March 2017 (also available in French).

*Burundi: The Army in Crisis*, Africa Report N°247, 5 April 2017 (also available in French).

*Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads*, Africa Report N°250, 2 August 2017 (also available in French).

*Avoiding the Worst in Central African Republic*, Africa Report N°253, 28 September 2017 (also available in French).

*Time to Reset African Union-European Union Relations*, Africa Report N°255, 17 October 2017 (also available in French).

*Cameroon: A Worsening Anglophone Crisis Calls for Strong Measures*, Africa Briefing N°130, 19 October 2017 (also available in French).

*Cameroon's Far North: Reconstruction amid Ongoing Conflict*, Africa Briefing N°133, 25 October 2017 (also available in French).

*Time for Concerted Action in DR Congo*, Africa Report N°257, 4 December 2017 (also available in French).

*Seven Priorities for the African Union in 2018*, Africa Briefing N°135, 17 January 2018 (also available in French).

*Electoral Poker in DR Congo*, Africa Report N°259, 4 April 2018 (also available in French).

*Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How the Catholic Church Can Promote Dialogue*, Africa Briefing N°138, 26 April 2018 (also available in French).

*Increasing the Stakes in DR Congo's Electoral Poker*, Africa Briefing N°139, 8 June 2018 (also available in French).

*DR Congo: The Bemba Earthquake*, Africa Briefing N°140, 15 June 2018 (also available in French).

*Cameroon's Far North: A New Chapter in the Fight Against Boko Haram*, Africa Report N°263, 14 August 2018 (also available in French).

*Helping the Burundian People Cope with the Economic Crisis*, Africa Report N°264, 31 August 2018 (also available in French).

*Cameroon: Divisions Widen Ahead of Presidential Vote*, Africa Briefing N°142, 3 October 2018 (also available in French).

*Chad: Defusing Tensions in the Sahel*, Africa Report N°266, 5 December 2018 (also available in French).

*Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to Talks?*, Africa Report N°272, 2 May 2019 (also available in French).

*Chad: Avoiding Confrontation in Miski*, Africa Report N°274, 17 May 2019 (only available in French).

*Making the Central African Republic's Latest Peace Agreement Stick*, Africa Report N°277, 18 June 2019 (also available in French).

*Running Out of Options in Burundi*, Africa Report N°278, 20 June 2019 (also available in French).

*A New Approach for the UN to Stabilise the DR Congo*, Africa Briefing N°148, 4 December 2019.

*Avoiding the Resurgence of Inter-communal Violence in Eastern Chad*, Africa Report N°284, 30 December 2019 (also available in French).

### Horn of Africa

*Instruments of Pain (II): Conflict and Famine in South Sudan*, Africa Briefing N°124, 26 April 2017.

*Instruments of Pain (III): Conflict and Famine in Somalia*, Africa Briefing N°125, 9 May 2017.

*Instruments of Pain (IV): The Food Crisis in North East Nigeria*, Africa Briefing N°126, 18 May 2017.

*Kenya's Rift Valley: Old Wounds, Devolution's New Anxieties*, Africa Report N°248, 30 May 2017.

*Time to Repeal U.S. Sanctions on Sudan?*, Africa Briefing N°127, 22 June 2017.

*A New Roadmap to Make U.S. Sudan Sanctions Relief Work*, Africa Briefing N°128, 29 September 2017.

*How to Ensure a Credible, Peaceful Presidential Vote in Kenya*, Africa Briefing N°129, 2 October 2017.

*Managing the Disruptive Aftermath of Somalia's Worst Terror Attack*, Africa Briefing N°131, 20 October 2017.

*An Election Delay Can Help Avert Kenya's Crisis*, Africa Briefing N°132, 23 October 2017.

*Uganda's Slow Slide into Crisis*, Africa Report N°256, 21 November 2017.

*After Kenya's Leaders Reconcile, a Tough Path Ahead*, Africa Briefing N°136, 13 March 2018.

*Somalia and the Gulf Crisis*, Africa Report N°260, 5 June 2018.

*Averting War in Northern Somalia*, Africa Briefing N°141, 27 June 2018.

*Al-Shabaab Five Years after Westgate: Still a Menace in East Africa*, Africa Report N°265, 21 September 2018.

*Improving Prospects for a Peaceful Transition in Sudan*, Africa Briefing N°143, 14 January 2019.

*Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition*, Africa Report N°269, 21 February 2019.

*Salvaging South Sudan's Fragile Peace Deal*, Africa Report N°270, 13 March 2019.

*Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute*, Africa Report N°271, 20 March 2019.

*Averting Violence in Zanzibar's Knife-edge Election*, Africa Briefing N°144, 11 June 2019.

*Women and Al-Shabaab's Insurgency*, Africa Briefing N°145, 27 June 2019.

*Time for Ethiopia to Bargain with Sidama over Statehood*, Africa Briefing N°146, 4 July 2019.

*Somalia-Somaliland: The Perils of Delaying New Talks*, Africa Report N°280, 12 July 2019.

*Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution*, Africa Report N°281, 21 October 2019.

*Déjà Vu: Preventing Another Collapse in South Sudan*, Africa Briefing N°147, 4 November 2019.

*Keeping Ethiopia's Transition on the Rails*, Africa Report N°283, 16 December 2019.

*Averting Proxy Wars in the Eastern DR Congo and Great Lakes*, Africa Briefing N°150, 23 January 2020 (also available in French).

### **Southern Africa**

*Zimbabwe's "Military-assisted Transition" and Prospects for Recovery*, Africa Briefing N°134, 20 December 2017.

*Four Conflict Prevention Opportunities for South Africa's Foreign Policy*, Africa Briefing N°152, 27 March 2020.

### **West Africa**

*Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram*, Africa Report N°244, 23 February 2017.

*Niger and Boko Haram: Beyond Counter-insurgency*, Africa Report N°245, 27 February 2017 (also available in French).

*The Politics of Islam in Mali: Separating Myth from Reality*, Africa Report N°249, 18 July 2017 (only available in French).

*Double-edged Sword: Vigilantes in African Counter-insurgencies*, Africa Report N°251, 7 September 2017 (also available in French).

*Herders against Farmers: Nigeria's Expanding Deadly Conflict*, Africa Report N°252, 19 September 2017.

*The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North*, Africa Report N°254, 12 October 2017 (also available in French).

*Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force*, Africa Report N°258, 12 December 2017 (also available in French).

*Preventing Boko Haram Abductions of Schoolchildren in Nigeria*, Africa Briefing N°137, 12 April 2017.

*Frontière Niger-Mali : mettre l'outil militaire au service d'une approche politique*, Africa Report N°261, 12 June 2018 (only available in French).

*Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence*, Africa Report N°262, 26 July 2018.

*Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali*, Africa Report N°267, 13 December 2018 (also available in French).

*Nigeria's 2019 Elections: Six States to Watch*, Africa Report N°268, 21 December 2018.

*Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, Africa Report N°273, 16 May 2019.

*Returning from the Land of Jihad: The Fate of Women Associated with Boko Haram*, Africa Report N°275, 21 May 2019.

*Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists*, Africa Report N°276 (also available in French), 28 May 2019.

*Getting a Grip on Central Sahel's Gold Rush*, Africa Report N°282, 13 November 2019 (also available in French).

*The Risk of Jihadist Contagion in West Africa*, Africa Briefing N°149, 20 December 2019 (also available in French).

*Managing Trafficking in Northern Niger*, Africa Report N°285, 6 January 2020 (also available in French).

*Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, Africa Report N°287, 24 February 2020, (also available in French).



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