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Events of 2015

In Burundi, following years of civil war that began in 1993, the Arusha Accords, which were signed in 2000, have provided a platform for peaceful power-sharing between Burundi's ethnic Hutu majority and its long-dominant Tutsi minority, who comprise 14 per cent of the population. The extreme marginalization of the indigenous Batwa, representing less than 1 per cent of the population, remained largely unaffected by the settlement.

In April 2015, Hutu President Pierre Nkurunziza announced his controversial decision to stand for re-election for a third term, which many saw as a violation of the provisions of the Arusha Accords. Nkurunziza had led the largest, primarily Hutu rebel movement, subsequently restructured as the National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party, before winning elections in 2005 and 2010. After the announcement of his re-election bid, both Hutus and Tutsis took to the streets in protest. Tensions increased further after a failed May coup attempt by some members of the army, which had historically been dominated by the Tutsi minority but since Arusha had undergone extensive ethnic integration. Security forces, state officials and members of the militia, the youth league of the predominantly majority Hutu CNDD-FDD, launched an aggressive crackdown on media, civil society, protesters and members of the opposition, both Hutu and Tutsi. Nkurunziza went on to win national elections held in July, widely condemned by international observers as neither free nor fair.

In the run-up to and after the elections, experts expressed concern at inflammatory rhetoric on both sides. UN Special Adviser on the prevention of genocide Adama Dieng noted that some was 'very similar to language used before and during the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda'. He expressed concern that both government officials and key figures in the mixed-ethnicity opposition appeared to be trying to exacerbate ethnic tensions in order to set Hutus and Tutsis against each other once again. At his August inauguration Nkurunziza announced an amendment to the law on religious groups and non-governmental organizations to limit their involvement in public and political matters, undermining post-Arusha gains in building a cross-community culture and civil society.

Unlawful killings, torture and repressive measures against civil society escalated following the election, as did attacks by armed opposition forces. The United Nations (UN) reported in mid-December that at least 340 people, including both Hutu and Tutsi, had been killed in politically motivated violence. Scores were killed in early December following a series of armed attacks on military installations in Bujumbura: while authorities described them as 'enemies', intimating they had all been combatants, a significant number of the casualties were reported to be unarmed civilians from primarily opposition-supporting Tutsi neighbourhoods killed after being taken into custody during house-to-house searches by security forces in the aftermath of the attacks. By the beginning of 2016, at least two new armed opposition groups had reportedly formed with the stated aim of ousting Nkurunziza.

On 18 December, based on the findings of an assessment mission sent to Burundi with the president's approval, the African Union's (AU) Peace and Security Council invoked for the first time provisions allowing it to intervene in a country without permission given grave circumstances. It authorized deployment of a 5,000-strong military mission to protect civilians and preserve the gains made by the Arusha Accords. However, the government refused to allow the AU troops into Burundi, prompting the AU to cancel deployment and instead focus on supporting regional mediation efforts. By the end of the year, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that nearly 233,000 Burundians had fled to neighbouring countries since April.

Building on the Arusha framework, before the April unrest UNESCO and others had worked to facilitate non-violent conflict resolution among young people of different ethnicities and had promoted training on democracy, human rights and the 'promotion and protection of the diversity of cultural expressions'. In 2014 UNESCO inscribed Burundi's ritual dance of the royal drum on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This centuries-old cultural practice, used to mark seasonal changes and commemorate key events, pre-dates the colonial era and the divisive ethnic distinctions imposed on Hutus and Tutsis as the basis of Belgian rule: as such, it offers a symbol of a more peaceful collective past.

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