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The political crisis became less overtly violent, although serious human rights violations continued, including unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, torture and other ill-treatment and arbitrary arrests. Violence against women and girls increased. The rights to freedom of expression and association were stifled. With increased repression and unchallenged impunity, a climate of fear took hold in the capital and elsewhere. Around 3 million people needed humanitarian assistance by the end of the year due to the political crisis, the collapsing economy and a series of natural disasters.

Background

The political crisis sparked by President Nkurunziza's decision in 2015 to stand for a third term became increasingly entrenched and was accompanied by a deepening socio-economic crisis.

Mediation efforts under the auspices of the East African Community stalled, despite the appointment in March of former Tanzanian President, Benjamin Mkapa, as facilitator. The National Commission for Inter-Burundian Dialogue reported that most participants had called for constitutional amendments, including the removal of term limits. With many Burundians in exile or afraid to express dissent, the Commission's findings risked being one-sided.

The AU stepped back from the protection force proposed in December 2015 and decided instead to send a delegation of five African heads of state and government to Burundi in February. In July, the UN Security Council authorized the deployment of up to 228 police officers, a move rejected by the government.

On appeal in May, the Supreme Court sentenced 21 army and police officers to life imprisonment for their involvement in the failed coup attempt in May 2015. Five others received two-year sentences and two were acquitted. The sentences were heavier than those handed down in January.

On 20 August, General Evariste Ndayishimiye was elected Secretary General of the ruling National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces of Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD).

After several months of consultations, the EU decided in March to suspend direct financial support to the government, pending regular reviews. In October the EU judged that commitments proposed by the government to address its concerns were insufficient to restart support. The EU renewed sanctions against four men "deemed to be undermining democracy or obstructing the search for a political solution to the crisis in Burundi" by inciting acts of repression against peaceful demonstrations or participating in the failed coup. Similarly, the USA issued sanctions against a further three people, bringing the total under US sanctions to 11.

Access to basic services was hampered by the insecurity and deteriorating economy. Cuts to external financial assistance led to massive budget cuts. Natural disasters, including floods, landslides and storms, exacerbated the situation. Humanitarian organizations estimated that 3 million people needed assistance in October, up from 1.1 million in February. A cholera epidemic was declared in August and cases of malaria were almost double those seen in 2015.

Unlawful killings

Hundreds of people were unlawfully killed in targeted and indiscriminate killings related to the crisis. NGOs continued to report the discovery of mass graves. Amnesty International's analysis of satellite images and video footage from a site in Buringa near the capital, Bujumbura, supported witness accounts that people killed by security forces in December 2015 were later buried in mass graves.¹ In February, the Mayor of Bujumbura showed the media a grave in the Mutakura neighbourhood of the capital that he alleged was dug by members of the opposition. The government did not take up offers from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Independent Investigation on Burundi (UNIIB) to help document alleged mass graves.

In early 2016, there were regular grenade explosions in Bujumbura followed by targeted killings. On 22 March, Lieutenant Colonel Darius Ikurakure, an army officer implicated in numerous human rights violations, was shot dead inside the army's headquarters. On 25 April, gunmen fired on the car of General Athanase Kararuzza, killing him, his wife Consolate Gahiro and his assistant Gérard Vyimana and fatally wounding his daughter Daniella Mpundu. The previous day Human Rights Minister Martin Nivyabandi and Diane Murindababisha were injured in an attack. On 13 July, unidentified gunmen killed Hafsa Mossi, a former minister and member of the East African Legislative Assembly. A senior presidential adviser, Willy Nyamitwe, was injured in an assassination attempt on 28 November.

Enforced disappearances

Reports of enforced disappearances, often implicating the National Intelligence Services (SNR), continued and numerous cases from 2015 remained unsolved.

Jean Bigirimana, a journalist with the independent media outlet Iwacu, was last seen on 22 July.² His colleague received a phone call saying he had been taken by people believed to be members of the SNR. Two bodies in an advanced state of decomposition were later found in a river; neither could be identified.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment continued to be perpetrated at an alarming rate and with impunity by the SNR, the police and the Imbonerakure, the youth wing of the ruling party. Methods documented included: beating with branches, iron bars and batons; electric shocks; stamping on victims; denial of medical care; verbal abuse; and death threats.³ People who refused to join the Imbonerakure said they were beaten during arrest and in detention, apparently as a punishment. Others were beaten as they tried to flee the country.

Violence against women and girls

In November, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women expressed concern about an increase in serious sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls by the police, military and Imbonerakure.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions

There were regular police searches and arrests in neighbourhoods of Bujumbura where the 2015 protests had been concentrated. In these neighbourhoods and other parts of Burundi, police regularly checked household notebooks in which residents should be registered.

On 28 May, the police arrested several hundred people in the Bwiza neighbourhood of Bujumbura. A police spokesperson was reported as saying that it was normal to arrest people near a grenade attack as the perpetrators might be found among them.

On 25 August, the police presented to the media 93 people who had been arrested and accused of begging as part of the “clean city” operation.

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression was stifled at all levels of society.

Hundreds of secondary school students were suspended for doodling on a photo of the President in their textbooks. In June dozens of students were arrested and accused of insulting the President, including in Muramvya, Cankuzo and Rumonge provinces. Two were charged with participating in an insurrectionary movement and mobilizing students to demonstrate. The rest were released by mid-August.

Burundian and international journalists faced persecution, despite the reopening of two private radio stations in February. Phil Moore and Jean-Philippe Rémy, who were working for the French newspaper *Le Monde*, were arrested in January. Julia Steers, an American journalist; Gildas Yihundimpundu, a Burundian journalist; and their Burundian driver were arrested on 23 October. Julia Steers was taken to the US Embassy the same day, but Gildas Yihundimpundu and the driver were held overnight at the SNR. Léon Masengo, a journalist with Isanganiro FM, was briefly detained on 11 November after he went to cover the interrogation of a police officer accused of many human rights violations.

Freedom of association

Members of opposition political parties faced repression.

In March, at least 16 members of National Liberation Forces (FNL) party were arrested at a bar in Kirundo province. The police said they were holding an unauthorized political meeting. Local opposition party leaders who opposed President Nkurunziza’s re-election were beaten and threatened by the Imbonerakure. Throughout the country, the Imbonerakure put pressure on people

to join it or the ruling CNDD-FDD, and carried out campaigns of intimidation against those who refused.

In December, the national assembly adopted two laws on national and foreign NGOs which will impose stricter controls on their work.

Human rights defenders

Human rights work became increasingly dangerous and difficult. The SNR increased surveillance of human rights defenders and other perceived government critics. Victims and witnesses of violations were afraid to speak out.

In October, the Minister of Interior banned five leading human rights organizations that had been suspended in 2015. The Minister suspended five others the following week, one of which, Lique Iteka (the Burundian Human Rights League) was permanently closed in December, following the publication of a controversial report.

Following the review of Burundi by the UN Committee against Torture in July, a Burundian prosecutor called on the Bar Association to strike off four lawyers who contributed to the civil society report submitted to the Committee. Pamela Capizzi of Switzerland-based TRIAL International, an NGO, was asked to leave the country on 6 October despite having a visa.

Lack of accountability

Victims of human rights violations continued to face serious challenges in accessing justice. Journalist Esdras Ndikumana was tortured in August 2015 and filed a complaint at the Supreme Court in October 2015. No progress was made in the case in 2016.

Judicial investigations continued to lack credibility. In March, the Prosecutor General announced the findings of a commission of inquiry into alleged extrajudicial executions committed on 11 December 2015 and the subsequent discovery of suspected mass graves. According to the report, all but one person found dead in the Bujumbura neighbourhoods of Musaga, Ngagara and Nyakabiga had participated in the fighting. While an exchange of fire did take place on 11 December, this was followed by cordon-and-search operations in which many people were killed by a bullet to the head and at least one body was found tied up.

The operational phase of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which covers 1962 to 2008, was launched in March and began collecting testimonies in September. It does not have judicial authority and the special tribunal that was initially envisaged was not established.

Refugees and internally displaced people

Approximately 100,000 people fled Burundi in 2016, bringing the total number of Burundian refugees who had fled the ongoing crisis to over 327,000. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated that 139,000 people were internally displaced due to the crisis and natural disasters.

People trying to flee were abused and robbed. Members of the Imbonerakure were largely responsible, although refugees also accused people in police and military uniforms.

Women's rights

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women expressed concern about: the high secondary school drop-out rate for girls; women's limited access to basic health care and sexual and reproductive health services; the continued criminalization of abortion; and the fact that 45% of incarcerated women were serving sentences for abortion and infanticide. The Committee highlighted the concentration of women working in the informal sector in unskilled and low-paid jobs without social protection. It also noted the lack of protection of domestic workers from exploitation and sexual abuse, and the failure to ban child labour.

International scrutiny

The situation in Burundi came under intense scrutiny by international and regional bodies, and the government became increasingly hostile in its responses to such initiatives.

In February, the government agreed to an increase in the number of AU human rights observers and military experts to 200. By the end of the year, only a third of these had been deployed and a memorandum of understanding was yet to be signed.

In April, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights presented to the AU's Peace and Security Council the report of its December 2015 fact-finding mission to Burundi. Its recommendations included the establishment of a joint regional and international investigative mechanism.

The UN Committee against Torture requested a special report from Burundi, which was reviewed in July. The government delegation only attended half of the review and did not respond to questions. However, it did submit further feedback in October.

The UNIIB presented its report to the Human Rights Council (HRC) in September.⁴ It found that gross, systematic and patterned human rights violations were taking place and that impunity was pervasive. To follow up, the HRC established a commission of inquiry on Burundi. Burundi rejected this move and, in October, banned the three UNIIB experts from Burundi and suspended co-operation with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights pending renegotiation.

In April, the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) opened a preliminary examination into the situation in Burundi. On 8 October, both the National Assembly and the Senate voted to leave the ICC.⁵ The UN Secretary-General received official notification of Burundi's withdrawal from the Rome Statute of the ICC on 27 October, which will come into effect after a year.

1. Burundi: Suspected mass graves of victims of 11 December violence ([AFR 16/3337/2016](#))
2. Burundi: Whereabouts of Burundian journalist unknown – Jean Bigirimana ([AFR 16/4832/2016](#))

3. Burundi: Submission to the United Nations Committee against Torture, 25 July-12 August 2016 ([AFR 16/4377/2016](#))
4. Burundi: Written Statement to the 33rd session of the UN Human Rights Council ([AFR 16/4737/2016](#))
5. Burundi: ICC withdrawal must not block justice for crisis abuses ([News story](#), 12 October)

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