

Communique Annual Civil Society Organizations Forum Held in Arusha Tanzania on 30th March 2017 on the Situation In Burundi

We applaud the East African Community's ongoing efforts at mediation chaired by President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and facilitated by additional mediator, former Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa.

We welcome progress made beginning 6 February 2017, when the Special Adviser's team worked with the African Union and the EAC facilitation team agreeing to form "**a Joint Technical Working Group**" to support the dialogue process. We note that this development marks a significant enhancement of collaboration among the EAC member states, the African Union and the United Nations.

We further welcome the deployment of 45 African Union human rights observers 23 African Union military experts to Burundi as of February 2017.

We appreciate the largely neutral and cohesive role the Burundi military has played so far with objectivity and professionalism equal to the distinctive service they are providing as part of the African peace keeping force in Somalia.

That notwithstanding:

We are deeply concerned that despite several meetings in the dialogue process chaired by president Museveni and intensive consultations by Facilitator Mkapa with the government of Burundi and members of the political opposition, little or no progress has been achieved at the negotiating table so far. We fear that the stagnation of the dialogue process shall only increase political instability, acts of impunity and insecurity.

We regret indications that the cohesion of the military may be strained by recent legislation that opens the window to the Burundi military working with partisan and divisive militia groups (such as *Imbonerakure*) in an environment of heightened political violence and widespread human rights abuses. Our concern is informed by evidence in the public domain that points to party youth wing militia stepping up attacks on perceived opponents who they kill, rape, and torture, abduct, illegally detain and torture. We are equally disturbed reports of local journalists and human rights activists' that several covert and targeted grenade attacks and killings are believed to have been committed by armed opposition groups. Even senior government officials have not been spared as unknown assailants have also targeted them for assassination.

We urge all to take note that the Burundi socioeconomic situation shows key macroeconomic indicators on the decline, growth in the negative, investment falling, public debt increasing, and unemployment, especially among youth on the rise.

We are disturbed that the worsening refugee situation is a seething time bomb. Accounts of harassment of fleeing population, including extortion and arbitrary arrest of people suspected of having links to the opposition clearly defy international law. Upwards of 325,000 people (and still counting) have fled Burundi to neighbouring countries and beyond.

We warn that the increasing refugee burden to neighbouring countries amid reports of occasional violence related to spill-over of the conflict shows a high risk for it to become regionalized. Already there are reports of attacks on refugees in camps across the borders. Hostile diplomatic exchanges between some host countries and Burundi government are being witnessed with a disturbing frequency and punitive measures taken that restrict free movement of people among others which undermine the EAC treaty and spirit of regional cooperation.

We condemn in the strongest terms the treatment of civil society activists and independent journalists most of who remain in exile after repeated threats and arrest warrants against several of them, in particularly after the Interior Minister banned or suspended 10 Civil Society organizations that had spoken out against government abuses.

We affirm Burundi CSOs as a critical party to a peaceful resolution to the conflict and the critical responsibility under regional and international law for the government of Burundi to ensure CSOs regain legitimacy and are accorded the space and enabled to do their work.

Moving Forward

As concerned members of EAC civil society we urge all parties to uphold the foundational values of the Arusha Agreement, namely, justice, the rule of law, democracy, good governance, pluralism, respect for the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual, unity, solidarity, equality between women and men, mutual understanding and tolerance among the various political and ethnic components of the Burundian.

We call on all parties and especially the government of Burundi to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the “joint technical working group” and work with it to realize faster resolution of the conflict.

We specifically encourage the government of Burundi to halt the progressive withdrawal from engagement with international efforts to help resolve the country’s long-running political crisis and immediately resume cooperation. We further petition the Government of Burundi to accelerate implementation of full AU’s deployment of human rights and military observers and additionally provide space for international monitors to observe and document the ongoing political developments.

We call upon the international community to increase resources for humanitarian aid to Burundian refugees displaced by political violence in Burundi and across

borders. We particularly urge United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) or United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to continue publicly supporting and offering diplomatic assistance and technical support to the EAC's ongoing mediation efforts and with it give additional legitimacy to the EAC's role as a regional peace broker.

We appeal to the UNSC to reconsider sending a United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping force to establish refugee safe zones within Burundi to provide citizens with an opportunity to seek shelter while remaining in their country, where they are more likely to remain part of the political process within Burundi and contribute to peacebuilding.