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Six day postponement of Burundi elections an ‘insufficient gesture’, NGOs warn

The Burundian government’s decision to postpone the Presidential elections from July 15 to July 21 will not allow conditions for free and fair elections to be met, according to a coalition of 17 African and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). If they go ahead on Tuesday 21 July, elections could intensify the country’s political, security and humanitarian crisis, and leave civilians vulnerable to spiralling violence.

The groups criticize the postponement as an insufficient gesture that ignores the risk that elections could spark major violence and lead to the additional displacement of tens of thousands of civilians. They are calling for the renewal of an internationally-mediated dialogue between the government, opposition and civil society to resolve the political impasse and create a conducive environment before elections take place.

“More than 145,000 people have fled the country since April and scores have already been killed - but this could be just the beginning of something much worse. In the current context of tensions and credible threats of further violence, holding elections next week could push Burundi into a much deeper crisis,” said Ndung’u Wainaina, Executive Director of the Nairobi-based International Center for Policy and Conflict.

As the climate of fear intensifies throughout the country, there is a serious chance that many more people will flee the country, increasing pressure on Burundi’s neighbours. Opposition parties, who have accused President Nkurunziza of undermining the constitution by seeking a third term, have said they will not participate in elections and have threatened to ramp up protests if they go ahead in the current context.

According to UN electoral observers, Burundi's recent parliamentary elections were held in conditions "not conducive to the holding of free, fair, peaceful, transparent and credible elections". Voters were called to cast their ballot amidst a severe crackdown on the media and on other human rights and basic freedoms.

“An inclusive and open dialogue is a prerequisite to solving the crisis in Burundi. This can only happen if free and pluralistic media are allowed to operate, including private outlets,” said Christophe Deloire, Secretary-General of Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

President Obama's Ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, has warned that Burundi is “on the brink” while the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has said he fears the political crisis could lead to the commitment of atrocities. Worrying reports of armed incursions in the north-west and the emergence of an armed rebellion, as recently declared by a former Burundian General, suggest an escalation – and possible regionalisation – of the crisis.

The European Union is considering targeted sanctions against “those whose actions might have led or might lead to acts of violence and repression and human rights violations.” African and international NGOs back this call, and urge the immediate deployment of human rights monitors before any election takes place.

“Without immediate dialogue and sincere efforts to create conditions for free and fair elections, the stability of Burundi and the entire region will be under threat,” said Peter Rundlet, Vice President at Humanity United. “A global consensus is growing that these elections must be postponed long enough to pull Burundi back from the brink. Piecemeal delays are not enough to benefit Burundians, the region, and the international community.”

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List of signatories: Africa Peace Forum (APF), Africa Research and Resource Forum (ARRF), Center for Conflict Resolution (CECORE), Center for Democracy and Development (CDD), Forum pour le Renforcement de la Société Civile au Burundi (FORSC), Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect (GCR2P), Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), Héritiers de la Justice, Humanity United, International Center for Policy and Conflict (ICPC), Journalistes en Danger (JED), Mensen met een Missie, Nairobi Peace Initiative – Africa (NPI – Africa), Pan African Lawyers Union (PALU), Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF), Tearfund, Women in Alternative Action (WAA)

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