

Country Update

Burundi

(February 21, 2021)

Context and government response:

As of October 19, 2020, Burundi has registered 1,849 cases of COVID-19, including 3 deaths. However, the government has taken few precautions and the rate of testing is low. This is fuelling concerns from health experts that the true extent of the outbreak is not known, as an increasing number of patients presenting with COVID-19 symptoms are received at hospitals but refused tests. Several medical workers interviewed by Human Rights Watch also raised these concerns and alleged the government-managed National Institute for Public Health and the authorities refuse to carry out tests or adequately report on the pandemic.

The Burundian government has refused to follow most other African countries in imposing lockdown measures and former President Pierre Nkurunziza had refused to impose restrictions, allowing sporting events and mass political rallies to go ahead, and schools and places of worship to continue operating. Furthermore, on May 12, 2020, Burundi's foreign ministry issued a directive which expelled the World Health Organization (WHO) officials from the country, including experts heading the country's COVID-19 response. The directive declared that the WHO country representatives were *persona non grata* without any reason stated behind this decision. In an interview with the BBC back in March, Nkurumziza's spokesperson, Jean-Claude Karerwa Ndenzako, cited divine protection as the reason for the country's low infection rate, and stated that Burundi "is an exception among other nations, because it is a country that has given God the first place". GNWP partners report that prevention measures such as hand washing and wearing masks are not respected by a

majority of people due to a lack of sensitization and awareness about the risks of COVID-19, as well as a lack of access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities in homes.

Human rights groups claim that the government and ruling party, National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD), had pressed ahead with the vote no matter the cost, and accuse the ruling party and its youth wing of crushing dissent and threatening those taking their own measures against COVID-19. Huge political rallies have been held across the country, drawing tens of thousands of supporters together, and President Nkurunziza had even pressed ahead with national elections to choose his successor, despite concerns about the spread of COVID-19 in mass gatherings. On May 14, 2020 the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi had raised concerns that hate speech and incitement to violence against political opponents were on the rise, as clashes between the two main political parties in the margins of election rallies have increased.

On May 20, 2020, the Burundian general election was held and on May 30, the national electoral commission announced that ruling party presidential candidate, Évariste Ndayishimiye, had won the presidential vote. President Ndayishimiye announced his new cabinet, consisting of five women and ten men. He retained five ministers from Nkurunziza's last cabinet, including health minister Dr. Thaddée Ndikumana, under whose leadership Burundi took minimal measures to stop the spread of the pandemic. Human rights defender Imelde Sabushimike was also named as the new minister for Solidarity, Social Affairs, and Human Rights.

On June 8, 2020, former President Nkurunziza died due a cardiac arrest according to a government statement. However, it has been speculated that the true cause of death was COVID-19, as his wife had been flown to Nairobi after contracting COVID-19 several days prior according to unconfirmed reports, which would make Nkurunziza the first fatal case of COVID-19 as a head of state.

Following the elections and under new leadership by President Ndayishimiye, the government has shifted its stance on COVID-19 prevention and launched a mass testing



campaign in July 2020 in Bujumbura. This marks a significant policy shift as compared to previous approaches which largely ignored the dangers of the outbreaks.

Summary of impact:

The government's response and messaging has also resulted in the proliferation of fear and rumours about the spread of COVID-19, as "the authorities' reckless approach to the pandemic is adding further uncertainty and fear to an already politically charged atmosphere when accurate statistics and transparency are needed to save lives" according to Lewis Mudge, Central Africa Director at Human Rights Watch. GNWP partners report that as a result of an increase in the spread of fake news regarding COVID-19, many families have stock-piled essential goods to prepare for confinement. This situation has severely negatively impacted women traders as they have used their minimal disposable income and savings to purchase these items and are now facing financial difficulties due to a lack of income-generating activities. They also noted that the cost of basic goods and necessities has significantly increased, including the cost of potatoes, rice and other imported goods, which has significantly impacted the livelihoods of women traders. Furthermore, they highlight that women and girls are at higher risk of exposure due to their roles as primary givers, since they are responsible for a disproportionate amount of the care burden such as caring for sick community members.

In mid-April, weeks of torrential rains hit Burundi causing severe flooding in Gatumba district. Thousands of homes, businesses, and crops were swept away, and over 45,000 people were affected, of whom up to 18,000 were displaced. In the context of COVID-19, there are concerns that the new displacement sites could increase the spread of the virus due to overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. GNWP partners report that people living in refugee or internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, a majority of which are women and children, are at higher risk of exposure to COVID-19 due to the precarious living conditions and lack of assistance in the camps. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi has also stated that some humanitarian organisations were refused access to sites where persons were quarantined in deplorable conditions.

Responses led by women peacebuilders:

GNWP partners participated in the response measures proposed by the Government but faced several barriers to full, equal and meaningful participation including financial difficulties in proposing several response strategies including direct assistance to their communities. They note that women-led organizations are facing a lack of funding, which has impacted their ability to continue providing services and assistance to women in their communities. A lack of access to technology and internet connectivity for many women means that they cannot be reached by women-led organizations, but these groups are adapting to the context of COVID-19 and continuing their work by hosting smaller meetings that comply with social distancing regulations. GNWP partners are also raising awareness about compliance with prevention measures taken by the government.

