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Burundi: Sixty-five organizations call for immediate release of *Iwacu* journalists

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On the first anniversary of their arrest, 65 organizations call for the immediate and unconditional release of the *Iwacu* journalists Agnès Ndirubusa, Christine Kamikazi, Egide Harerimana and Tércence Mpozenzi who were convicted on charges against state security for simply doing their job. Their continued detention on baseless charges is a stark reminder that, despite a recent change in leadership, the Burundian government has little tolerance for independent journalism and free speech, the organizations said.

On 22 October 2019, the four journalists were arrested along with their driver Adolphe Masabarakiza as they went to report on clashes between the security forces and an armed group in Bubanza province. Although they had informed the provincial authorities of their plan to travel to the area, they were arrested on arrival and later accused of threatening internal state security. However, during the trial, the prosecution presented no evidence of the journalists having any contact with the armed group.

Although they were charged with complicity in threatening the internal security of the state, Ndirubusa, Kamikazi, Harerimana and Mpozenzi were ultimately convicted of attempting to commit the crime, a lesser criminal offense. Their lawyers say that they were not informed of the change to the charge prior to the verdict or allowed to defend themselves against it in court, violating fair trial standards. All four were sentenced to two and a half years in prison and fined one million Burundian francs (approximately 525 USD). Masabarakiza, who had been provisionally released in November 2019, was acquitted. Ndirubusa, Kamikazi, Harerimana and Mpozenzi appealed their conviction, but in its 4 June decision the Ntahangwa Court of Appeal upheld the verdict.

The message sent by the courts is an attempt to intimidate and threaten other journalists from doing their work and reporting on what is happening inside the country, the organizations said. The conviction and continued detention of the four journalists also runs counter to Burundi's constitutional guarantees on freedom of expression, as well as regional and international obligations in accordance with Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It is particularly inconsistent with the African Commission's 2019 Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, which specifically provides that states shall take measures to prevent "arbitrary arrest and detention" of journalists.

Iwacu is one of the few remaining independent media houses operational in Burundi. Hundreds of journalists and human rights defenders have fled the country since the

start of the political crisis in 2015 and those still working in the country often face threats and harassment. Releasing Ndirubusa, Kamikazi, Harerimana and Mpozenzi would be an important first step towards reopening civic space and recognizing the contribution of reliable media reporting in ensuring access to information for all Burundians.

Signatories:

1. ACAT-Burundi (Action des chrétiens pour l'abolition de la torture)
2. Amnesty International
3. ARTICLE 19 Eastern Africa
4. Association Burundaise pour la Protection des Droits Humains et des Personnes Détenues (APRODH)
5. Association des journalistes indépendants du Bénin
6. Bloggers Association of Kenya
7. Burundi Human Rights Initiative
8. Cellule Norbert Zongo pour le journalisme d'investigation en Afrique de l'Ouest
9. Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy
10. CNCD-11.11.11
11. Coalition Burundaise des Défenseurs des Droits de l'Homme
12. Coalition Burundaise pour la Cour Pénale Internationale (CB-CPI)
13. Coalition de la Société Civile pour le Monitoring Electoral (COSOME)
14. Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)
15. Collectif des Avocats pour la défense des victimes de crimes de droit international commis au Burundi (CAVIB)
16. Committee to Protect Journalists
17. Community Empowerment for Progress Organization-CEPO, South Sudan
18. Congress of African Journalists
19. Consortium of Ethiopian Human Rights Organizations (CEHRO)
20. Defend Defenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project)
21. Eastern Africa Journalists Network (EAJN)
22. European Network for Central Africa (EurAc)
23. Fédération internationale des ACAT (FIACAT)
24. Federation of African Journalists (FAJ)
25. Federation of Somali Journalists (FESOJ)
26. FIDH, in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
27. Forum pour la Conscience et le Développement (FOCODE)
28. Forum pour le Renforcement de la Société Civile (FORSC)
29. The Ghanaian PEN Centre
30. Human Rights Network for Journalists- Uganda
31. Human Rights Watch
32. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)

33. Kenya Correspondents Association
34. Kenya Editors' Guild
35. Kenya Union of Journalists
36. Laws and Rights Awareness Initiative (LRAI)
37. Ligue Burundaise des droits de l'homme Iteka
38. Ligue des journalistes Tchadiens (LJT)
39. La Maison de la presse du Niger
40. Media Council of Tanzania
41. Media Institute of Southern Africa
42. Mouvement des Femmes et Filles pour la Paix et la Sécurité au Burundi (MFFPS)
43. Mouvement Inamahoro Femmes & Filles pour la Paix & la Sécurité
44. National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders - Uganda
45. Observatoire de la lutte contre la corruption et les malversations économiques (OLUCOME)
46. Ökumenisches Netz Zentralafrika (ÖNZ)
47. One Day Seyoum
48. OpenNet Africa
49. Organisation Patronale des Médias du Gabon (OPAM)
50. Paradigm Initiative
51. PEN International
52. PEN Nigeria
53. PEN South Africa
54. PEN Zimbabwe
55. Reporters sans Frontières (RSF)
56. Réseau des Citoyens Probes (RCP)
57. SOS-Torture/Burundi
58. Syndicat National des Journalistes Indépendants du Togo (SYNJIT)
59. Syndicat Professionnels Information Communication Sénégal (Synpics)
60. Tournons la Page - Burundi
61. Tournons la Page International
62. TRIAL International
63. Ugandan PEN
64. Union Burundaise des Journalistes
65. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders