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Heads of States
East African Community
EAC Headquarters
Arusha
United Republic of Tanzania

16 May 2017

Your Excellencies,

Open letter on urgency of addressing Burundi Crisis during upcoming EAC Heads of State Summit

While recognising the efforts already underway, I am writing to urge you to ensure that resolving the Burundi crisis is a priority for the Heads of State Summit of the East African Community to be held on 20 May, and to provide the renewed political leadership and commitment which is needed to end the crisis.

Although the security situation in Burundi may lately have appeared to be normalising, the recent increase in violence and unlawful killings would suggest otherwise. In recent months, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recorded 210 allegations of enforced disappearance between October 2016 and January 2017, and the discovery of 22 dead bodies in January alone. The Government of Burundi has failed to investigate these violations and has shown no interest in meaningfully cooperating with investigations by regional and international institutions into allegations of serious human rights violations.

The government continues its crackdown on the political opposition and civil society in Burundi. In a public letter dated 29 March, the opposition group in parliament, Amizero y'Abarundi, complained that their members were being subjected to arbitrary arrests, abductions, enforced disappearances and targeted killings, especially members and supporters of the pro-Agathon Rwaswa wing of the National Liberation Forces (FNL). OHCHR has also reported that political opponents have been targeted for arbitrary arrests and detention, ill-treatment while in detention and enforced disappearances. Two laws which increase oversight measures and controls on national and international NGOs came into force in January 2017, further restricting their ability to operate.

These human rights violations have instilled fear among the population, repressing their freedom to voice their opinions for fear of reprisals. Further, many political opposition and civil society actors remain in exile, unable to return for fear of persecution. In this context, the government is pushing ahead with plans to amend the Constitution – which is expected to include the removal of presidential term limits and other safeguards under the Arusha Agreement, including ethnic quotas to ensure power-sharing. Amnesty International is concerned that this could escalate tensions within the country, and lead to increased human rights violations.

Meanwhile, Burundi's economy is suffering from the continuing crisis, and poverty is deepening. According to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the country's economy shrank in 2016 and is projected to grow by only 2% in 2017 due to the current political crisis. Inflation rose from 4.38% in 2014 to 5.6% in 2016. After years of a relative stability, the country's currency has considerably lost its value to the US dollar over the past two years. The Burundian Franc went from 1561 against the dollar in April 2015 to 1713.54 in April 2017. The number of people requiring humanitarian

assistance rose dramatically in 2016 from 1.1 million people to 3 million. Alongside much of the region, the entire country has been affected by rising food insecurity. Between October 2016 and January 2017, the number of people classed as food insecure rose from 2.1 million to 3 million. On 21 April, a World Food Programme convoy carrying food supplies for 112,000 people was blocked from entering Burundi from Rwanda. The police spokesperson cited security reasons for the decision, without providing further details.

The crisis in Burundi continues to have a knock-on effect in the region. The number of refugees hosted by neighbouring countries is continuing to grow and is predicted to top 500,000 people by the end of 2017. A fragile security situation also threatens the stability of the region. While calling on the international donor community to urgently contribute to the severely underfunded Burundi Regional Refugee Response for 2017, Amnesty International urges the Heads of State of the East African Community to commit to ensuring that all asylum seekers fleeing Burundi continue to receive protection.

The need to find a solution to end the ongoing human rights crisis is more urgent than ever. Amnesty International continues to believe that the Burundi Dialogue, with the full support of the EAC, is an essential part of that solution. We therefore welcome recent moves by the UN, the African Union and the EAC to strengthen coordination of the regional and international response, including through the establishment of the Joint Technical Working Group on the Burundi Dialogue, which should be swiftly and effectively operationalised.

Amnesty International urges the Heads of State of the East African Community to ensure that the Burundi Dialogue has the best possible chance of success, including by:

- Pressing the Government of Burundi to conduct independent investigations into allegations of human rights violations, and cooperate with regional and international human rights institutions;
- Insisting that there is broad representation in the Burundi Dialogue, including of independent civil society and media, who have an essential role to play in bringing an understanding of the views and needs of the population to the table;
- Supporting a more coordinated regional and international response to the crisis, including through political support to the Joint Technical Working Group on the Burundi Dialogue, and pushing for the finalisation of the Memorandum of Understanding between the African Union and the Government of Burundi, to allow a full deployment of the agreed human rights observers and military experts to document human rights violations and as a pre-emptive early warning mechanism to ensure the protection of civilians;
- Ensuring the continued protection of all Burundian refugees and asylum seekers.

I look forward to your continuing engagement on this matter. Amnesty International stands ready to provide further information and support to assist these efforts.

Yours sincerely,

Salil Shetty
Secretary General