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Burundi: Protect Independent Human Rights Reporting

Authorities should reverse decision to expel international human rights worker

(28 May 2010) - A group of 18 national, regional and international organizations working on Burundi today expressed concern that space for independent human rights reporting may be diminishing following the Burundian government's decision to expel the Human Rights Watch (HRW) Burundi researcher from the country. The organizations call on the Burundian authorities to reverse their decision and ensure that the rights to freedom of expression are respected.

This attack on independent human rights reporting came just days before Burundi's communal elections on 24 May, the first in a series of five elections that are to take place in 2010. The elections are a crucial moment in Burundi's history, a country recovering from more than a decade of civil war.

In a letter to the HRW researcher, Ms Neela Ghoshal, on 18 May 2010, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation informed Ms Ghoshal that her accreditation as HRW's representative in the country was withdrawn. She was asked to immediately stop her activities and to leave the country by 5 June 2010.

In the letter, the authorities cited a recent HRW report on pre-election violence as the reason for their decision. According to the letter, the report was biased against the government and the ruling National Council for the Defense of Democracy-Forces for Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) party. They alleged it failed to give sufficient attention to the authorities' attempts to overcome human rights violations in the pre-electoral period.

HRW stated in a 19 May release that they stand by the research noting that it documents human rights abuses by different groups, not just the ruling party and that the research respected professional standards of objectivity.

"The decision by the authorities is not only an attack on one highly respected rights activist but on independent human rights work in Burundi," said Hassan Shire Sheikh, executive director of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project. "Given the importance of ensuring credible and impartial rights monitoring, the decision is concerning and gives the wrong signals at this crucial time in the country's history."

Ms Ghoshal has worked in Burundi for almost three years and documented a range of rights violations from mob violence to police abuses. Ms Ghoshal has an excellent record of engagement and collaboration with other human rights organizations working in Burundi, collaboration which has proven time and again to be effective in helping to advance key rights in the country.

"Coming just weeks after the de-facto expulsion of HRW's researcher in Rwanda, this development may signal a worrying trend for independent international rights reporting in the region," said Véronique Aubert, Africa deputy director at Amnesty International. "The international community should act swiftly to condemn expulsions of international human rights workers and call on Burundian authorities to re-instate HRW's work authorisation."

Recommendations

To the Burundian authorities

- Ensure that rights to freedom of expression are respected.
- Reinstate the work authorisation of Human Rights Watch's Burundi researcher, Neela Ghoshal.

To the international community

- Condemn the expulsion of an international human rights worker from Burundi.
- Call on the Burundian authorities to re-instate the work authorization for Human Rights Watch's Burundi researcher.

Background

This week's decision follows steps taken by Burundian authorities during the pre-election period to restrict space for freedom of expression and civil society activity.

On 23 November 2009, the Minister of Interior annulled the legal registration of the Forum for the Strengthening of Civil Society (FORSC), a respected civil society umbrella organization, citing irregularities in its registration application, an application previously approved by the same ministry in 2006. The ordinance banning the organization was subsequently suspended, but FORSC's legal status has not been legally rectified.

Prominent Burundian human rights activists have faced harassment and acts of intimidation, including death threats during the pre-electoral campaign, as a result of their involvement in a campaign to ensure justice for the April 2009 assassination of anti-corruption activist, Ernest Manirumva, Vice President of Anti-corruption and Economic Malpractice Observatory (OLUCOME).

Days before the banning of FORSC in November 2009, FORSC's President, Mr Pacifique Nininahazwe, received information of a potential plot to assassinate him. In March 2010, Pierre Claver Mbonimpa, president of the Association for the Protection of Human Rights and Detained Persons (APRODH), and Gabriel Rufyiri, president of OLUCOME, stated they were under enhanced surveillance and warned of potential assassination plots against them.

Mr. Pierre Claver Mbonimpa was summoned on 3 May 2010 by the prosecution to respond to questions about his work and involvement in the Ernest Manirumva campaign.

Supporting organisations

Action by Christians against Torture Burundi (ACAT Burundi)

Action by Christians against Torture France (ACAT France)

Amnesty International (AI)

Civil Peace Service Programme Great Lakes (AGEH)

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation

Development and Peace

East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (EHAHRDP)

EurAc (European Network for Central Africa)

Forum for the Strengthening of Civil Society (FORSC)

Front Line

Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation (ICCO)

International Federation of Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture (FIACAT)

International Refugee Rights Initiative

Ligue Iteka

Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, joint programme of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)

Observatory of Government Action (OAG)

Oxfam International

Refugees International