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East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project

Ahead of elections, the UN keeps a spotlight on human rights in Burundi

Geneva-Kampala, 27 September 2019 — The UN Human Rights Council (“Council”) has decided to keep a spotlight on Burundi ahead of key elections scheduled for 2020. Today, the Council adopted a resolution that extends the mandate of the Commission of Inquiry (CoI) on Burundi for one year and condemns a wide range of human rights violations and abuses, a move which DefendDefenders welcomes.

“Maintaining scrutiny over Burundi’s human rights situation is the right thing to do, as all signals are red in the electoral period,” said Hassan Shire, Executive Director, DefendDefenders. **“We once again urge the Burundian authorities to change course and engage with the UN human rights system, including the Commission of Inquiry.”**

The resolution adopted today with a broad majority¹ extends the mandate of the CoI, which has been investigating human rights violations and abuses committed in Burundi, reporting to the Council, and transmitting case files to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for prosecutions. The resolution also condemns a range of violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including those that may amount to crimes against humanity, calls for the protection of human rights defenders, civil society members, and journalists, and urges the Burundian Government to cooperate with the international community.

Additionally, the resolution welcomes the work carried out by the CoI with respect to “risk factors” for atrocity crimes. In the report it presented to the Council on 17 September 2019, the CoI analysed risk factors and indicators of atrocity crimes, human rights violations and abuses, which are a key element of prevention ahead of presidential, legislative, and Senate elections scheduled for 20 May (for the former two) and 20 July 2020 (for the latter). Burundi fulfils a large number of these risk factors and indicators.

“The risk factors identified by the Commission are a key tool and a breakthrough for the Council. The international community should heed the warning and stand ready to act,” said Estella Kabachwezi, Senior Advocacy and Research Officer at DefendDefenders. **“Existing and future inquiry mechanisms could draw inspiration from the CoI on Burundi’s ‘risk factor’ approach and overall preventative work.”**

The Council, which is the UN’s main body in charge of human rights promotion and protection, concludes its 42nd regular session on 27 September 2019. It is composed of 47 Members, elected for three-year terms. Burundi has been on the Council’s agenda since a political, humanitarian, and human rights crisis erupted in the country in 2015, when President Nkurunziza announced its intention to run for a third term in office, against the letter and spirit of the Arusha Agreement, which had brought an end to Burundi’s civil war. The Council established the CoI on Burundi in September 2016.

¹ 23 States voted in favour of the resolution, 11 voted against it, and 13 abstained.



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Ahead of the session, DefendDefenders led civil society efforts to urge the renewal of the CoI's mandate. Our main asks were outlined in a [joint letter](#)² signed by more than 40 Burundian, regional, and international NGOs. We also held an event on the margins of the Council's 42nd session to express support for the resolution and draw attention to risks associated with elections.

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² DefendDefenders *et al.*, "Burundi: Extend CoI mandate for a further year," 2 August 2019, https://defenddefenders.org/press_release/burundi-extend-coi-mandate-for-a-further-year/ (accessed on 27 September 2019).