



Is Burundi Inching Toward War?

October 21, 2015 • by [Hillary Matfess](#)

Violence in Burundi, including shootings and even grenade attacks, have become common in Bujumbura, the capital of this tiny country, since President Pierre Nkurunziza [announced](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2015/04/burundi-president-run-term-protest-150425134353242.html) his intention to run for a third term this spring. The nature of the violence—most recently this past weekend, when at least eight people were killed in shootings—highlights the brutality and systemic nature of the conflict, and the execution-style killings of political opponents, widespread use of torture, and rhetoric concerning Rwandan involvement suggest that the violence is spiraling out of control and could potentially destabilize the region.

Nkurunziza's anticipated re-election has plunged the country into the worst political crisis that the country has faced since the end of its civil war. Though the Burundian Supreme Court [ultimately ruled](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/burundi-court-validates-president-term-bid-1505095216200.html) that such a run was constitutional, the widely held belief that the court is [controlled by Nkurunziza](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/150508061821607.html) and his party, the National Council for the Defense of Democracy—Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD), has fuelled further protests.

Citizens told Reuters that “most of the dead” from this weekend’s violence “were civilians and some had been [found](http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKCNORYOI120151004?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0) with their hands tied behind their backs.” The Burundian police are suspected of carrying out this violence; as early as 2009, commentators noted that “the police is increasingly considered [subservient to the ruling party](https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/SSRM%20Burundi%20v1.pdf).” The escalation of the targeting of citizens is troubling, especially when combined with reports of coerced confessions, electronic shock torture, beatings, and the “[brazen attack](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/08/burundi-shooting-of-human-rights-activist-increases-climate-of-fear/)” on prominent human rights defender Pierre-Claver Mbonimpa; Mbonimpa, the president of the Association for the Protection of Human Rights and Detained People, was shot in early August by pro-government gunmen.

The normalization of brutal tactics by the state’s security forces suggests the possibility for systemic violence by state actors against perceived threats to Nkurunziza’s regime. This is all the more threatening when you consider the sheer size of the force; the Burundian National Police absorbed a number of former combatants, causing the force to “swell from 2,300 in 2000 to somewhere between [15,000 and 20,000 officers](https://books.google.com/books?id=4X3NEGwd654C&pg=PA10&lpg=PA10&dq=burundian+national+police&source=bl&ots=pDFnMdTxfB&sig=k_2VYunuAObn190p1ZRbhjsVfKE&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CEoQf) in 2007.” Finding current statistics on the size of the force is difficult “because not all have been registered and some [do not have administrative files](https://books.google.com/books?id=4X3NEGwd654C&pg=PA10&lpg=PA10&dq=burundian+national+police&source=bl&ots=pDFnMdTxfB&sig=k_2VYunuAObn190p1ZRbhjsVfKE&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CEoQf).”

The targeted violence this weekend was accompanied by allegations that Rwanda was training and sponsoring anti-government militia members. Speaking with the BBC, Burundian Foreign Minister Alain Nyamitwe accused Rwanda of hosting the failed coup leader and “[helping rebels launch cross-border attacks](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34413855).” Rwanda has denied the claims, leading to even frostier relations between the two countries and creating a perception of the neighboring country being a safe haven for their respective domestic opposition. In recent months, Kigali “[has become a refuge](http://mgafrika.com/article/2015-10-04-burundis-hunt-for-rebels-spooks-frightened-rwandans#.VhElyvqpoTY.twitter)” for many opposition and civil society activists—as well as dissidents from Nkurunziza’s ruling party.”

In July, Al Jazeera reported from the [Mahama refugee camp](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/burundi-refugees-lured-join-rebel-group-150724095201444.html) in Eastern Rwanda that Burundians who had fled to Rwanda were “being recruited” into rebel groups to return to Burundi to overthrow Nkurunziza. However, despite accommodating approximately [30,000 people](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendocPDFViewer.html?docid=55ca0f52&query=mahama), there were only reports of a few dozen men joining such efforts.

For his part, Rwandan President Paul Kagame has suggested that members of the Hutu rebel group Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) were crossing into Burundi (<http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/Kigali-says-Burundi-security-situation-affecting-Rwanda/-/2558/2706948/-/41g600z/-/index.html>) to lend support to the Imbonerakure, the youth wing of Nkurunziza's party that have been accused of harassing the political opposition in Burundi. For years, Rwandan perceptions that Burundi "has turned a blind eye to, or even encouraged (<http://allafrica.com/stories/201510130211.html>), the presence on its territory of members of the [FDLR]," have strained relationships between the two countries. The current instability and displacement crisis has only heightened uncertainty and roused fears on both sides of the border.

Part of the reasons that Nkurunziza and his supporters are suspicious of Kagame is his history of backing rebel groups in the region. A UN report found that Rwanda (with Ugandan assistance) was supporting the rebel group M23 (<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/10/2012101755814154.html>) in their efforts to overthrow Kabila's government in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Though Rwanda denied supporting M23, the BBC reports that "Rwanda has backed armed movements in the Congo during the past two decades (<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/10/2012101755814154.html>), citing a need to tackle Rwandan rebels operating out of Congo's eastern hills."

The diplomatic conflict between the two countries was anticipated shortly after Nkurunziza announced his intentions to run for a third term; Paul Kagame, who is contemplating his own third-term bid, released a statement condemning the choice, saying to President Nkurunziza "if your own citizens tell you, 'We don't want you to lead us, how do you say I am staying whether you want me or not?'" (<http://www.newsforwanda.com/featured1/27610/step-down-kagame-tells-nkurunziza/>) Nkurunziza responded to this critique harshly, releasing a statement that fiercely defended his decision and stated that enemies "will not be allowed to set fire to the country (<http://mgafrica.com/article/2015-05-15-nkurunziza-seems-to-warn-rwanda-over-coup-says-any-war-will-be-fought-on-the-other-side-of-the-border/>)," considered by some to be a veiled reference to Rwandan intervention.

Regardless of whether or not these accusations of cross-border rebel support are true, the Burundian government's paranoia regarding the Rwandan intervention has ramifications. At present, there are roughly 70,000 (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34413855>) Burundians living in refugee camps in Rwanda, having fled the electoral violence in their own country. Their repatriation could be complicated or even prevented if they are suspected of being a part of a Rwandan conspiracy, condemning them to statelessness and permanent displacement. The resources of the international community have already been strained attempting to care for the additional half-million refugees in the region (<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e45a6c6.html>).

Already the Burundian government's targeting of Rwandans and those who travel frequently to Rwanda has slowed down movement between the two neighboring countries and has contributed to a climate of fear. *Mail and Guardian Africa* reported that "buses to Burundi from... Rwanda used to be full, but now they struggle for passengers (<http://mgafrica.com/article/2015-10-04-burundis-hunt-for-rebels-spooks-frightened-rwandans#.VhElyvqpoTY.twitter>);" those who do brave the trek are subject to checkpoints, where "passengers are regularly taken off... and accused of being part of a rebel army" backed by Rwanda.

Even those who travel privately have been harassed at these checkpoints. *Mail and Guardian* reported the story of Alois Bayingana, a Rwandan taxi driver, who "was arrested in August in a Bujumbura bar after driving a customer to the city from Kigali." While in custody at the National Intelligence Agency, Bayingana states (<http://mgafrica.com/article/2015-10-04-burundis-hunt-for-rebels-spooks-frightened-rwandans#.VhElyvqpoTY.twitter>) that he was severely beaten. "They kept saying that I was a rebel sent by Kagame," he said.

The escalating violence against civilians perpetrated, coupled with the increased difficulty in reaching safe havens outside of the country, suggests that the death tolls in Burundi could skyrocket if there is no intervention. The African Union's Peace and Security Council recommended (<http://www.cnbc.com/news/east-africa/2015/10/19/african-union-troop-deployment-burundi/>) recently that the organization "expedite and finalize the contingency planning ... for the purposes of the deployment in Burundi, should the situation so require, of an African-led mission to prevent widespread violence in the country;" however, this is no guarantee of an adequate or timely troop deployment. The deteriorating situation in Burundi threatens to pile on to a region already stricken by sustained instability and periodic violence. Further, Burundian paranoia concerning Rwandan support for rebel groups and the impunity with which the police have acted against domestic political opponents could plunge the country into a major crisis.

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