



Security Council

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Letter dated 2 November 2020 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council

I refer to the letter dated 23 July 2020 from the President of the Security Council (S/2020/766), in which the Council requested me to provide, no later than 31 October 2020, a written report with recommendations assessing the challenges facing Burundi and the scope and modalities of United Nations engagement in the country, alongside the African Union and the region, to support Burundi in achieving sustainable peace, reconciliation and development.

On 29 June 2020, I had a telephone conversation with the President of Burundi, Évariste Ndayishimiye, to extend my condolences following the death of the former President, Pierre Nkurunziza, and to congratulate him on his election as President. We also discussed modalities for future United Nations support for Burundi. Mr. Ndayishimiye welcomed my offer to dispatch a multidisciplinary mission to assess the situation in the country and identify areas of potential United Nations support.

I asked my Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, Huang Xia, and the Assistant Secretary-General for Africa, Bintou Keita, to jointly lead a strategic assessment mission to Burundi. The multidisciplinary team was deployed to the country from 14 to 19 September 2020 and included the participation of members of the United Nations country team. The delegation held consultations with national and international stakeholders on all issues relevant to relations between Burundi and the United Nations. I transmit herewith my report (see annex), which contains recommendations for enhancing cooperation between the United Nations and Burundi.

As outlined in the report, the desire of Burundi for positive change is genuine and strong. The international community has the opportunity to support the Government and people of Burundi to seize that momentum, by actively assisting them in achieving the desired transformation of the country, while also facilitating reconciliation, the establishment of an inclusive political system and the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all Burundians.

The openness of President Ndayishimiye and the Government of Burundi to collaborate with regional and international actors, in a spirit of mutual respect and collaborative partnership, is commendable and will greatly help in achieving full reconciliation and the desired transformation. To that end, I reiterate the commitment of the United Nations to support the Government and the people of Burundi in their path towards a peaceful and prosperous future.



I am grateful to the Government of Burundi for the support extended to the strategic assessment mission, which enabled its deployment to the country in full compliance with coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic preventive arrangements, and to all stakeholders for their active participation in the mission.

I should be grateful if you would bring the present letter and its annex to the attention of the members of the Security Council.

(Signed) António **Guterres**

Annex**Report of the Secretary-General on the strategic assessment mission for United Nations engagement in Burundi****I. Introduction**

1. The present report is submitted in response to the letter dated 23 July 2020 from the President of the Security Council (S/2020/766), in which the Secretary-General was requested to provide the Council, by 31 October, with a written report with recommendations assessing the challenges facing Burundi and the scope and modalities of United Nations engagement in the country, alongside the African Union and the region, for sustainable peace, reconciliation and development. The letter was issued in the context of recent developments, including the elections of 20 May 2020 and the evolution of the peace and security situation in the country. On 29 June, prior to the Council's request, the Secretary-General had a telephone conversation with the President of Burundi, Évariste Ndayishimiye, during which Mr. Ndayishimiye welcomed the Secretary-General's offer to dispatch a multidisciplinary United Nations mission to assess the situation in the country and identify areas of potential United Nations support.

II. Background

2. Following the 2015 crisis triggered by the bid of the late President, Pierre Nkurunziza, for a third term in office, the situation in Burundi was placed back on the agenda of the Security Council. Pursuant to Council resolutions 2248 (2015), 2279 (2016) and 2303 (2016), the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Burundi was established, succeeding the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Conflict Prevention, including in Burundi, to support the country and the region in finding a peaceful and lasting solution to the crisis.

3. In implementing its mandate, the Office of the Special Envoy for Burundi extended technical and substantive support to the facilitator of the East African Community-led inter-Burundian dialogue, the late President of the United Republic of Tanzania, Benjamin Mkapa. A joint technical working group, comprising the East African Community, African Union and United Nations, helped to facilitate five dialogue sessions. However, subsequent rounds of the dialogue process never materialized, despite efforts made by the facilitator and by the Special Envoy, the former Transitional President of Burkina Faso, Michel Kafando. In February 2019, having announced the end of his assignment, the facilitator submitted his final report and a road map for sustainable peace in Burundi to the mediator of the inter-Burundian dialogue, the President of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, for consideration by the twentieth Ordinary Summit of Heads of State of the East African Community, held that same month. The Summit decided to discuss the matter further and is yet to provide a way forward.

4. From 20 May to 24 August 2020, general elections were held in Burundi, in a relatively peaceful environment, leading to changes in the leadership of key State institutions, including the Office of the President, Parliament and communal and local councils. As a result, Mr. Ndayishimiye was sworn in as President on 18 June. The Prime Minister, Alain Guillaume Bunyoni, was appointed on 24 June, and the new Government was named on 28 June. Furthermore, on 25 August, Gélase Ndabirabe and Emmanuel Sinzohagera were elected as Speaker of the National Assembly and President of the Senate, respectively.

5. It was in that context that the strategic assessment mission, jointly led by the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lakes Region, Huang Xia, and the Assistant Secretary-General for Africa, Bintou Keita, visited Burundi from 14 to 19 September. The multidisciplinary mission also included participants from the United Nations Sub-Regional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa, the United Nations Resident Coordinator Office and the United Nations country team, including representatives of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of (UN-Women) and the United Nations Population Fund. Members of the strategic assessment mission met with key stakeholders in the country, notably the President of Burundi, government officials, leaders of political parties, the Ombudsman and representatives of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Independent National Human Rights Commission, as well as of civil society groups, including religious groups, women's organizations, youth groups, human rights organizations and the media. The team also met with representatives of regional and international organizations, including the African Union, the East African Community and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, heads of diplomatic missions accredited to Burundi and representatives of other United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and of international financial institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), among others.

III. Findings

A. Political and peacebuilding situation

6. The 2020 electoral process was considered to be generally peaceful, despite few incidents of overt violence between the ruling party and the opposition and claims of irregularities. Burundian stakeholders consulted during the strategic assessment mission signalled their acceptance of election results, affirming their readiness to move forward and to give the Government a chance to fulfil its electoral promises. In his inauguration speech on 18 June, Mr. Ndayishimiye presented the six principal priorities of his Government for the next seven years, namely: (a) good governance; (b) public health; (c) agriculture and cattle breeding; (d) youth unemployment; (e) social protection for pensioners; and (f) peace and reconciliation. In addition, on several occasions, the President has publicly expressed his openness to dialogue, referring to the inherent culture of dialogue present in Burundian society.

7. However, the prevailing context remains fragile. Some stakeholders raised concerns over the overwhelming control of the ruling party, the Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces pour la défense de la démocratie (CNDD-FDD), in State institutions (with 86 of 123 seats in the National Assembly and 33 of 39 seats in the Senate) and at all levels of the administration. Another concern expressed by stakeholders was the perceived militarization of the administration through the appointment of military and police officers to key ministerial and gubernatorial positions. Concerns noted by stakeholders consulted were also centred on the perceived tendency of the new administration to unilaterally impose its views on contentious issues. The fact that the Government has set conditions for the return of political figures and civil society activists perceived as having participated in the 2015 coup attempt was given as an example by some stakeholders. Many interlocutors expressed the urgent need to see concrete signs of the stated openness of the new Government and stressed the importance of building confidence among Burundians and with partners.

8. Moreover, several stakeholders noted that challenges to peace and stability in Burundi and the region remained unaddressed, including issues pertaining to security, exclusion, marginalization, refugees, reconciliation, social cohesion, political space and freedom of speech. Stakeholders continue to disagree on the best mechanisms for moving forward. It also appears that a sizeable segment of the population remains traumatized by past experiences, including with regard to violence, civil war and the 2015 crisis, which continue to influence their sentiments towards the new administration. That situation could explain the persistent and widespread mistrust among citizens and communities and between the opposition and the Government.

9. During his meeting with the strategic assessment mission, Mr. Ndayishimiye reiterated his six priorities and the importance of the national development plan. He underscored the progress made by the country since 2015, highlighting improvements in national security, the peaceful electoral process and the inauguration of new institutions. While voicing his openness to domestic dialogue among Burundians, he stated that the East African Community-led inter-Burundian dialogue process had been concluded. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation, Albert Shingiro, echoed that stance and asserted that peace and stability prevailed in the country, despite pending issues pertaining to reconciliation and social cohesion.

10. The President and his Minister for Foreign Affairs stressed that, as Burundi no longer posed a threat to international peace and security, it should be removed from the agenda of the Security Council. They also indicated the Government's readiness to engage, as soon as possible, in constructive dialogue on the future of the Office of the Special Envoy for Burundi and on the continuation of the Burundi configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission.

11. The new President and his Government are generally perceived by many stakeholders as being accessible and open to engagement with the international community. The spirit of openness displayed by the Burundian authorities and their willingness to improve dynamics in various sectors of society, such as political space, reconciliation, socioeconomic development, security, human rights and social cohesion, have been welcomed with cautious optimism by many. The President's efforts to reach out to some key stakeholders, notably former Presidents of Burundi, the Catholic and Protestant Churches, the African Union, the European Union, members of the Security Council, the African Group of Ambassador and most civil society and women's organizations, as well as United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and international financial institutions, were especially appreciated and highlighted by many interlocutors of the strategic assessment mission as positive steps towards the normalization of relations, including with foreign partners.

12. Some stakeholders concurred with the Government's request to have the situation in Burundi removed from the Security Council agenda, arguing that the removal of the item would enhance the country's profile for prospective partners and investors. However, others stated that granting the Government's request would be premature, considering that threats to peace and security stemming from the crisis in 2015 and concerns in connection with upholding some key provisions of the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi remained unaddressed. Moreover, some stakeholders noted that national institutions were not yet fully equipped to address those challenges adequately without support from the United Nations and other regional and international partners. They insisted on the need for continued international engagement on the country's sociopolitical process, in order to ensure the credibility of the process, assure the safety and security of the various external stakeholders and facilitate consensus among national stakeholders, who remain deeply divided along political lines.

13. In that regard, while several stakeholders continued to insist that the inter-Burundian dialogue should resume, questions were raised by some over its feasibility in the absence of engagement by the Government. Nevertheless, reaching consensus and building trust among key stakeholders in order to deliver on people's expectations for positive change remain major challenges for the new administration. In the same vein, most stakeholders – except the Government – emphasized the criticality of abiding by the letter and the spirit of the Arusha Agreement and of the preservation of the peace dividends thereby achieved.

B. Security situation

14. Views expressed by the various stakeholders differed as to the role and status of the Imbonerakure, the youth wing of the ruling CNDD-FDD party. Reports of several incidents indicate that some government officials and institutions are attempting to rein in on the Imbonerakure, whose members have been accused of taking on tasks assigned to the security forces and committing abuses and crimes with impunity. Contrary to several reports in which they are described as an impediment to lasting peace and accused of human rights violations, the Government has stated that the members of the Imbonerakure are not armed, do not constitute a threat to peace and security and are fully committed to supporting national development efforts. The Burundian authorities have further stated that some members of the Imbonerakure are also members of joint security committees, alongside women, local administrators, the police and the army. Several stakeholders noted that the search for alternate remunerative activities for members of the Imbonerakure remained a challenge for the authorities.

15. Following an extended period of relative calm, there are rising concerns over potential violence and destabilization in view of increasing military activities in some parts of the country. These activities include alleged infiltrations of armed groups from the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as subsequent clashes with security forces and reported attacks on civilians. The Government has downplayed those incidents as criminal activities conducted by groups of bandits. However, the armed group, Résistance pour un État de droit au Burundi, has claimed responsibility for some incidents, stating that it had acted in response to the refusal by the CNDD-FDD to engage in dialogue with members of the opposition. A Rumonge-area administrator announced that three members of the Congrès national pour la Liberté (CNL) had been arrested for their collaboration with a rebel group responsible for an armed incursion in which 13 civilians were killed in Rumonge Province in August.

C. Socioeconomic and budgetary situation

16. Recent development indicators for Burundi show that the timid economic recovery continued in 2019. Real gross domestic product (GDP), which was expected to reach 4.1 per cent in 2019 according to national projections (1.8 per cent according to the World Bank), will contract by 4.9 per cent in 2020, owing to the economic fallout from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The country's dependence on imported agricultural products will make it especially vulnerable to supply chain disruptions stemming from travel restrictions, including in neighbouring countries. Economic growth in 2021, which is projected to average 3.1 per cent year-over-year, will be underpinned by steady recovery in export-focused sectors, namely agriculture, which accounts for about 40 per cent of GDP, and mining.

17. The current account deficit is expected to decline owing to the sharp drop in oil prices and the rise in gold prices. The budget deficit is expected to grow to 6.1 per cent of GDP in 2020, as the contraction in international trade and economic activity leads to revenue loss and increased health spending as a result of COVID-19, combined with elections-related spending in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic contingency plan was budgeted at \$28.5 million for a six-month response, further widening the gap. Despite an earlier decline in inflation rates, average inflation is expected to rise steadily to reach 5.0 per cent in 2020, owing to an increase in food prices that could add to other pressures on the country's currency.

18. Public debt has increased significantly, rising from 34 per cent of GDP in 2014 to almost 50 per cent in 2018. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to lead to a drop in public revenues and an increase in spending in the wake of the emergency response measures put in place to address the pandemic. The situation is expected to further widen the budget deficit, which the Government will have to finance by resorting to borrowing and, potentially, external support.

19. Under the national development plan for 2018–2027, adopted in August 2018, the Government envisions Burundi becoming an emerging economy by 2027. The sociopolitical crisis of 2015 has, however, adversely affected its main economic and social indicators. While the country's dependency on foreign aid surpassed 50 per cent in 2015, Burundi has been losing direct budgetary support from various donors since 2016. Although the poverty rate remains high (72.9 per cent in 2018), mainly in rural areas, the Government continues to implement its national development agenda and has achieved commendable results in access to education (96 per cent) and drinking water (73 per cent).

20. The Government is placing considerable emphasis on social and economic development as the key to sustainable peace and security countrywide. During the mission, relevant government ministries underlined the need to overcome poverty, noting the importance of additional and substantial support from the international community to shore up those efforts. With the help of United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, significant progress has been made in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals. The Government's current main concern lay in how to address development through the President's six priorities, in line with the national development plan and the 2030 Agenda. Several stakeholders noted that, owing to a lack of proper consultations with partners prior to the adoption of the plan, receiving support and funding from partners for some of its components had proved difficult.

21. Job creation and income-generating activities to create wealth and meet expectations for better living conditions among the growing population, in particular women, young people, returnees and internally displaced persons, remain a matter of concern. Youth unemployment remains especially high. If left unaddressed, young people could fall prey to the influence of negative forces instead of becoming a driver for economic development. Among pressing economic challenges, difficulty in gaining access to arable lands is a potential trigger of violence that could be exacerbated by the return of refugees. Some stakeholders noted that the creation of cooperatives under the auspices of the Government had been met with scepticism.

22. Most interlocutors concurred that economic and democratic governance, as well as technical and institutional capacity-building, decentralization and the fight against corruption, were critical areas where support was needed from international partners, mainly United Nations agencies, funds and programmes.

D. Humanitarian situation

23. Humanitarian needs have increased progressively since early 2020, after a one-year decline. The uptick is linked mainly to pre-existing vulnerabilities aggravated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to unusually heavy rainfalls in late 2019 and early 2020, which led to the displacement of thousands of people and negatively affected harvests.

24. Despite its socioeconomic fragility, Burundi continues to host nearly 74,000 Congolese refugees, scattered among five camps and various urban locations across the country. The situation of some 41,000 refugees has been especially difficult, owing to ageing shelters and fragile camp structures that have been hit hard by heavy rainfall, compounding pre-existing vulnerabilities resulting from the absence of income-generating activities and continued reservations by the Government on refugees' right to work, as well as funding challenges.

25. In April 2020, severe flooding due to rising water levels in the Gatumba area affected 45,681 people and displaced 17,792 persons, of whom 56 per cent were women. That situation contributed to an overall 21 per cent increase in internal displacement since December 2019, with 131,336 internally displaced persons recorded in August 2020, of whom 55 per cent were women and 83 per cent had been displaced by natural disasters and were located mainly in the Province of Bujumbura Rural. A visit to the Gatumba displaced persons camp revealed the deplorable conditions in which residents lived, especially the women. With the current underfunding of the humanitarian response plan (at 31 per cent), humanitarian partners have been unable to meet all needs, and significant gaps in the response remain.

26. Adverse weather conditions combined with the COVID-19 pandemic have also negatively affected the food security situation, leading to an increase of over 30 per cent in the number of people targeted for food assistance since early 2020. The prevalence of acute malnutrition has also increased among children under 5 years of age, rising from 4.5 per cent in 2018 to 5.1 per cent in 2019, surpassing the 5.0 per cent World Health Organization alert threshold. Moreover, nutrition partners expect to see an increase of up to 20 per cent in moderate acute malnutrition as a possible indirect impact of the pandemic.

27. The Government's capacity to invest in health services has been significantly reduced over the past five years, owing in part to the suspension of direct budgetary assistance by a number of donors. Meanwhile, the country continues to face recurrent outbreaks of cholera and malaria in a context of insufficient medical infrastructure and response capacity. It is in this context that the Government of Burundi, together with its partners, started to address the COVID-19 pandemic. Although local capacity remains weak, Burundian authorities had conducted 39,522 tests as at 4 October and confirmed 514 positive cases (including 35 health workers), representing an overall infection rate of 1.3 per cent, with Bujumbura Mairie Province accounting for about 80 per cent of cases. While the level of testing and the number of confirmed cases remain relatively low, a declining trend in the use of health services was observed between January and April 2020, possibly as an indirect impact of the pandemic.

28. In a positive development seen in the past two months, the Government of Burundi has been implementing the tripartite agreements it had signed with UNHCR and the United Republic of Tanzania, on the one hand, and with UNHCR and Rwanda, on the other, for the repatriation of Burundian refugees. As at 30 September, more than 1,070 Burundian refugees have returned from Rwanda, and more returns are expected in the future. However, the presence of more than 74,000 Congolese refugees and asylum seekers and the arrival of more than 98,000 Burundian returnees

since September 2017, mostly from the United Republic of Tanzania, continue to put pressure on already scarce resources and have exacerbated competition for land and other reintegration challenges. Furthermore, allegations of the arrest and ill-treatment of some returnees from Rwanda could affect the positive trend recently observed and revive tensions along ethnic lines.

29. Stakeholders noted that, among the Burundian refugees, distinctions were being made between exiled politicians and civil society activists who were reportedly involved in the 2015 demonstrations and others who left the country as a result of the crisis, with the return of the politicians and activists more difficult to accommodate. The safe and dignified return of all willing refugees, and their protection and integration into communities, therefore, remain a matter of concern.

30. UNHCR continues to facilitate the repatriation of Burundian refugees who have made an informed decision to exercise their right to return home, from both countries in the region and further afield. However, unless conditions conducive to full reintegration are established, current challenges pose risks and may lead to secondary displacement, both within the country and across the border, thus aggravating the situation rather than bringing about a durable solution to the refugee problem.

31. While there was a clear commitment by humanitarian partners to continue to support Burundi in addressing humanitarian needs, several challenges, including low levels of funding for humanitarian response, continue to impede such efforts. Concerns were also raised during the mission regarding the Government's inclination to portray a positive image of the situation in the country, which, at times, has led to the underestimation of humanitarian needs and hampered efforts to raise funds. It was also noted that there was a need for the Government and its partners to harmonize data on the humanitarian situation on the ground.

32. Recent changes to the law on international NGOs remain a source of concern for some stakeholders. While there is support for the Government's efforts to ensure better representation of various ethnic groups in the workforce, international NGOs noted that the mechanisms proposed by the Government to ensure compliance posed risks of encroaching on their independence and of creating bottlenecks for recruitment. There is also a high level of mistrust surrounding the law and the requirement for such NGOs to collect data on the ethnicity of their staff in the absence of comprehensive government data on the ethnic composition of the population. For some development and humanitarian actors, discordances in statistics, the lack of proper and centralized coordination and a deficit in policy dialogue are also among the critical challenges that international partners continue to face in their day-to-day work.

E. Human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment

33. Human rights monitoring in Burundi has declined in recent years, owing to the absence of dedicated and independent mechanisms, institutions, voices and organizations. Since 28 February 2019, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Burundi has been closed, at the request of the Government. In the absence of a memorandum of understanding with the Government, the African Union human rights presence is reduced in scope, and several restrictions have been imposed on the human rights activities of the African Union team. In addition, the work of the Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry on Burundi, which has been denied access to government sources, is marred by controversies.

34. The Government described the human rights situation as positive, while acknowledging that solving the remaining challenges required continued cooperation

with the United Nations, mainly to support capacity-building for national institutions. According to Burundian authorities, human rights are among the priorities of the Government. During the mission, government officials and the ruling CNDD-FDD party systematically dismissed human rights concerns related to the Imbonerakure and its interference in security-related matters, while other stakeholders saw its members as contributing to insecurity and as perpetrators of most human rights violations.

35. In July and August 2020, the Government took notable steps to fight impunity. It arrested and prosecuted members of the Imbonerakure, senior police officers and local administrative officers for extortion and other criminal offences, thus increasing cautious optimism among civil society and political actors that the new administration will bring about change. However, the prevailing view conveyed by several stakeholders during the mission was that more steps needed to be taken for Burundi to meet its international human rights obligations. Several stakeholders were of the view that no decisive improvement could be expected until youth unemployment was tackled and both the police and the national intelligence service were reformed.

36. Representatives of the opposition and civil society organizations expressed regret about what they described as the continued shrinking of democratic space, through the marginalization and silencing of independent media and the targeting of opposition groups, in particular CNL militants, many of whom were reportedly in detention. Some political figures blamed the CNDD-FDD party and its youth wing for oppressing the opposition and excluding it from the management of public affairs following the elections, thereby compromising efforts towards reconciliation and peace consolidation. They condemned the closure of the OHCHR presence in Burundi in early 2019 and called for its reopening or, at least, the assignment of a human rights advisory team to the Resident Coordinator Office. They also underscored the importance of adequately managing internal security while ensuring respect for human rights.

37. Members of the strategic assessment mission noted convergent views among stakeholders on the need to foster the independence and effectiveness of the judiciary. Team members also noted unanimity of opinion on the effectiveness of the work of the Independent National Human Rights Commission, which will be central to cooperation between the United Nations and Burundi in advancing human rights. Some State departments and institutions, including the Ministry of National Solidarity, Social Affairs, Human Rights and Gender, the Human Rights Commission and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, also expressed their appreciation for the fruitful cooperation with the United Nations, while calling for more support in effectively facing persistent human rights challenges.

38. Significant progress has been made in some aspects of gender equality and the empowerment of women. That progress is reflected, inter alia, in the ratification of international and regional instruments that protect women's rights in general, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the existence of constitutional provisions that guarantee gender equality; the adoption of a national gender policy for 2012–2025; the establishment of a national action plan to implement Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#) on women and peace and security; the adoption of a provision to guarantee a quota of at least 30 per cent representation for women in Parliament, with the possibility of co-optation should that quota not be met; and the issuance of a guide for gender mainstreaming in the national programme for public administration reform. In particular, as a result of the quota provision and other gender-specific aspects of the electoral law, the May–August 2020 elections led to almost 40 per cent representation by women in the National Assembly, 45 per cent

representation in the Senate and 30 per cent representation in the Government. However, in the absence of binding legal provisions to uphold the 30 per cent quota, the representation of women in elections at the *collines* (hills) level, and at all levels of the administration, has remained minimal.

39. The role of women as peacemakers at both the community and national levels, especially through the nationwide network of women mediators and various women's organizations, was commended during the mission. Economic empowerment of women is being recognized for its contributions to livelihoods, education and healthy households. It has also been given attention in the national gender policy, resulting in the creation of an investment bank for women in 2020.

40. Nevertheless, some intractable obstacles remain to the full implementation of most of the legal instruments on the protection and empowerment of women, such as the weight of sociocultural norms and practices, the patriarchy, stereotypes and insufficient resources. Gender-based violence, including rape, is still a reality, yet the specific law punishing violence against women faces implementation challenges. Impunity for violence against women is still generalized and out-of-court settlement of cases is still commonly accepted.

41. Discrimination against women and girls in inheriting family land and property, but the process to develop legislation to address the matter has been stalled for several years, and the issue continues to be highly politicized. Some stakeholders noted that a lack of emphasis on the importance of gender equality and the empowerment of women in policy statements and declarations made by the current leadership was diverting attention from this critical issue. In most discussions with the strategic assessment mission, issues pertaining to gender equality and the empowerment of women were referred to in terms of the number of women in key institutions or positions. Despite some progress made, women remain underrepresented in nominative decision-making positions, especially management positions, at all levels in both the public and private sectors.

F. Regional and international cooperation

42. In his inaugural speech, Mr. Ndayishimiye committed his administration to improving the relationship between Burundi and the international community on the basis of mutual respect and shared interests. Since assuming office, the President has met with several representatives of foreign countries and bilateral and multilateral organizations, including the African Union, the European Union and the United Nations, to discuss ways to normalize and strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

43. Similarly, the Minister for Foreign Affairs has indicated on several occasions that economic diplomacy remains at the core of his activities, underlining the principles of mutual respect, complementarity and enhanced relations between Burundi and its neighbours, international organizations and the international community at large. Alluding to the suspension of direct budgetary support by the European Union in 2016, Mr. Shingiro also expressed hope that the "unilateral sanctions" imposed on Burundi would be lifted. Most of the stakeholders consulted during the strategic assessment mission appealed to the United Nations to advocate in favour of the resumption of international cooperation in support of the Government's development agenda. They noted that such cooperation would be one of the best ways to support Burundi in implementing its national development plan, in line with the President's six priorities, with a view to fostering economic growth, alleviating poverty and better positioning the country on the trajectory to meeting the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals.

44. On collaboration between Burundi and the countries of the Great Lakes region, Mr. Shingiro indicated that it was important to ensure good relations based on integration, trade and mutual enforcement of peace and security. Negative forces are still active in the region, with movements of combatants and weapons being reported in particular at the borders between Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda. Over the past few years, efforts towards greater regional cooperation on security matters have increased, as demonstrated by the series of meetings of heads of intelligence and security services held in 2019 and facilitated by the Office of the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region. More recently, the Expanded Joint Verification Mechanism of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region facilitated a meeting between the heads of the military intelligence services of Burundi and Rwanda, in an effort to address recurring violent incidents along their shared border. Porous borders, scarce resources, and unhealed wounds and resentment stemming from past conflicts, as well as general mistrust, continue to hamper efforts aimed at improving relations, mainly between Burundi and Rwanda, but also between Burundi and other regional and international partners.

45. On 6 August 2020, Burundi set conditions to the appeal by Rwanda for the two countries to peacefully settle their differences and reinstate diplomatic relationships, linking any normalization of relations to the extradition of the alleged perpetrators of the 2015 attempted coup and the removal of obstacles for the return of Burundian refugees hosted in Rwanda. Those conditions were reiterated by Mr. Shingiro during his meeting with members of the strategic assessment mission. Following the mission, on 20 October 2020, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Rwanda and Burundi met at the Nemba-Gasenyi one-stop border post, in what was the first bilateral meeting since the two countries cut ties in 2015. The two officials held a closed-door meeting and subsequently issued a joint communiqué in which they stated that the meeting had been meant to assess relations between their respective countries and explore modalities to normalize them.

46. The urgent need for reconciliation between Burundi and Rwanda was emphasized by several interlocutors, given the internal political implications of the tensions between the two countries and the toll they take on the livelihoods of communities in the border areas. Regarding relations with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, government officials pointed to the favourable state of cooperation between the two countries in addressing the threat posed by negative forces based in the two Kivu Provinces. On 5 October, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Marie Tumba Nzeza, visited Burundi to discuss issues pertaining to peace, security and trade between the two countries

47. While unanimously acknowledging that dialogue is the only way to achieve lasting peace in Burundi, there is a clear lack of consensus among States members of the East African Community on the best way to move the process forward. The East African Community-led inter-Burundian dialogue remains stalled and, in the absence of any decision by the Summit of Heads of State of the East African Community on the way forward, it is unclear how the Heads of State of the various countries in the region, including the dialogue mediator, Mr. Museveni, position themselves on the continuation of the process in the wake of the presidential election. One avenue proposed by some African Member States would be the establishment of a follow-up mechanism on the basis of the recommendations set out in the final report of the former dialogue facilitator. However, the scope and shape of that mechanism remain to be determined.

IV. Observations and recommendations

A. Political and peacebuilding situation

48. The desire of Burundians for positive change is genuine and strong. Member States and the United Nations should actively assist the country in achieving the transformation desired, while also facilitating political reconciliation, the establishment of an inclusive political system and the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedom for all Burundians. The approach to engagement should emphasize mutual respect, partnership and collaboration with the Government and with civil society institutions, as well as with regional and international actors.

49. Most Burundian stakeholders acknowledged that the 2020 elections did not address the issues that developed around the 2015 crisis. Critical elements that would ensure lasting peace and stability for Burundi remain outstanding, including the need for reconciliation, social cohesion and the opening and maintenance of the political space. Many national and international stakeholders have welcomed the openness to discussion expressed by President Ndayishimiye and his new administration. The United Nations is ready to seize that opportunity to engage with the Government, as well as with States members of the East African Community, the African Union Commission and other international partners, to explore the best ways to continue to foster a genuine and inclusive national reconciliation process, taking into consideration the President's preference for a Burundi-led and owned dialogue process, as well as recommendations made by the former dialogue facilitator and the former Special Envoy for Burundi. In order to support the country's renewed efforts to revamp bilateral and multilateral cooperation, relevant partners should take into account the relative progress made since 2015 and the Government's assessment that the country no longer poses a threat to regional and international peace and security.

50. In that regard, the United Nations will engage in discussions with Burundian authorities to find common ground for continued accompaniment in achieving the desired transformation. A successor to the Office of the Special Envoy for Burundi could take the form of a stand-alone office co-located with the Resident Coordinator Office, with some oversight by the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, thereby ensuring greater coherence, engagement and partnership in support of the country's efforts to develop a national reconciliation process, as identified by the President in his six priorities. In view of the above, I recommend the extension of the Office of the Special Envoy for Burundi until 31 December 2021, while it transitions to the new United Nations presence, the details of which will be agreed to by the United Nations and the Government of Burundi.

51. Such a reconfigured United Nations presence for political and peacebuilding support could provide technical and capacity-building assistance to national democratic institutions, such as the Ombudsman, the Independent National Human Rights Commission, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and local civil society organizations, including women's groups. It could also foster and support, as appropriate, genuine dialogue on key issues between the authorities and representatives of opposition groups, internal opposition and members of the diaspora, including those in exile, as well as civil society leaders, with a focus on reaching a consensus for sustaining peace, through the promotion of reconciliation, national cohesion, peacebuilding and peace consolidation. It is also suggested that the new office continue to support any initiative undertaken by the region to assist the Government of Burundi.

52. Regarding the stalled inter-Burundian dialogue, consultations among the East African Community, the African Union, the United Nations and the Government of Burundi would be critical to identifying an agreeable framework to address issues not resolved by the electoral process and other persistent political tensions in Burundi and the region. One option could be a shift from an East African Community-led inter-Burundian dialogue to a Burundi-led and owned dialogue, with the support of the United Nations, the African Union and the East African Community.

53. The United Nations, through the new iteration of its political presence and the United Nations country team, will support Burundian stakeholders in articulating a clear peacebuilding agenda to guide programming and mobilize resources for peacebuilding and conflict-prevention initiatives at the local and national levels. The new financing strategy for Burundi, to be developed by the Peacebuilding Fund on the basis of an updated conflict analysis and in line with the common country assessment and a prioritization exercise to be undertaken with key Burundian stakeholders, could play an important role in bringing Burundian stakeholders together and in identifying new programming initiatives. Those initiatives could complement, as necessary, continued mediation support under the aegis of the African Union and the East African Community, with additional support from the political presence of the United Nations.

54. The Peacebuilding Commission should continue to act, at the Government's request, as a platform for discussion between Burundi and its partners, in support of a peacebuilding agenda and of the national development plan, including for resource mobilization.

B. Socioeconomic situation

55. Considering the recent decline in human development indicators for Burundi, which will be further affected by the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19, the country's development priorities should continue to retain the focused attention of the international community, in line with the six priorities outlined by the President. To that end, the United Nations country team and international financial institutions will engage in dialogue with the Government on contributions they can make in the implementation of the national development plan, as revised and aligned with the President's six priorities and taking into account the economic and social impacts of the pandemic.

56. In view of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy and, in particular, on the most vulnerable, the United Nations country team will engage with the Burundian authorities on economic recovery, resilience interventions and institutional capacity. In that regard, I welcome the partnership between the Ministry of Finance, Budget and Economic Planning of Burundi and the World Bank, the African Development Bank and relevant United Nations agencies, funds and programmes. I also welcome the support of the Resident Coordinator Office and UNDP for the joint development, by the United Nations country team and donors, of a development partner support plan for a socioeconomic response to the COVID-19 pandemic, recovery and peacebuilding in Burundi.

57. I encourage reforms on key governance issues to pave the way for inclusive dialogue with the international community. I believe that lifting current financial and budgetary restrictions against Burundi could contribute to the improvement of overall interactions between the country and the international community. In that regard, if required, the United Nations could facilitate the resumption of the interactive dialogue between Burundi and international development partners.

C. Humanitarian situation

58. Addressing humanitarian needs in the country requires a renewed commitment by humanitarian partners and the Government of Burundi to engage in constructive dialogue for a common understanding of humanitarian principles and the independent nature of humanitarian action, with a view to improving joint collaboration on information sharing, data collection and transparency.

59. The return and reintegration of thousands of refugees with the Government's support cannot be sustained by the economy in its current state. To ensure that refugees reap the benefits of their return and strengthen their host communities, certain long-term investments are required beyond immediate return packages. In that regard, I encourage the Government to enhance its engagement with the regional and international development community for the reintegration of returnees into host communities. Furthermore, I call on international partners and donor countries to support United Nations and Government efforts to facilitate the return and reintegration of refugees and internally displaced persons.

60. I urge the Government to lift its reservations regarding refugees' right to work and to access the labour market in order to allow them to achieve self-sufficiency, contribute to the national economy and mitigate the risk of their engagement in illegal activities, including association with armed groups.

D. Human rights, gender equality and the empowerment of women

61. I welcome the openness of the Burundian authorities to continue to collaborate with the United Nations on human rights matters and to take concrete steps to ensure accountability for serious human rights violations. I call upon the Government to approve the re-establishment of an OHCHR presence in Burundi. This would be an important demonstration of the Government's commitment to promoting human rights and a reaffirmation of its readiness to partner with the United Nations to achieve that objective. Such a presence could provide increased support for the strengthening of institutions dedicated to the promotion and protection of rights, including the Independent National Human Rights Commission and the judiciary, as well as for the implementation of relevant recommendations of international human rights mechanisms.

62. The United Nations country team, in particular UN-Women, will continue to engage and support the Government of Burundi in addressing systemic and structural issues hindering progress in women's rights and gender equality. It is important to support the operationalization of the investment bank for women, in order to advance the realization of economic rights for and the empowerment of women. Support should also continue to be provided for the role of women peace mediators in implementing the national action plan on Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), especially with regard to issues of community dialogue, healing, tolerance and reconciliation. Support for the implementation of the women and peace and security agenda in Burundi needs to be part of the peacebuilding agenda and road map for the country and would, in that respect, receive continued funding and support from the Peacebuilding Fund.

63. There is significant representation for women in the National Assembly, the Senate and the Government to advance issues related to gender and women's rights. Capacity-building in their various areas of responsibility, transformational leadership and gender-specific training need to be provided to ensure that those women can deliver effectively on their responsibilities as decision-makers and can move the issue of the empowerment of women forward. Initiatives could include the revision of

gender-discriminatory laws, as well as working in collaboration with the judiciary and other relevant institutions and leveraging their oversight role, so as to ensure that gender equality and the empowerment of women are integrated into government policies and actions across all key institutions.

E. Security situation

64. The role of the youth wing of the ruling CNDD-FDD party, the Imbonerakure, in public safety and security remains a point of controversy among Burundians. With the Government's concurrence, the United Nations could help the authorities to address such concerns, by providing support for activities that facilitate the socioeconomic insertion of Imbonerakure members. If necessary, specific weapons-collection programmes could be designed to ensure sustainable peace and security in the country and the region.

65. United Nations entities will continue to engage Burundian authorities and relevant regional entities, including the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, with a view to consolidating the confidence-building process of the chiefs of intelligence and security services of States members of the Conference. Those efforts will be considered within the United Nations regional strategy for peace consolidation, conflict prevention and conflict resolution in the Great Lakes region.

F. Regional and international cooperation

66. The recent elections and political transition have offered the country and its bilateral and multilateral partners an opportunity to reset their partnership, if all involved display the necessary flexibility and are willing to overcome past hurdles and engage in constructive dialogue. Finding the common ground needed to balance the Government's concerns about moving the country away from international scrutiny so that it can focus on development issues with the Security Council's responsibility to maintain international peace and security will facilitate the resolution of that equation.

67. Guided by the priorities of the new Government and the country's commitments under regional and international frameworks, the United Nations will engage key stakeholders to help bring about significant improvement in relations between Burundi and the subregion, the region and the international community, in order to rebuild trust and cooperation. In that regard, the relevant United Nations entities (the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, the Department of Peace Operations, the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lakes Region, the Development Coordination Office and the Peacebuilding Commission) will facilitate collaboration among the respective United Nations country teams in the region and the co-guarantor institutions of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework to mobilize regional and international partners in supporting projects that hold economic promise for Burundi and that could also yield regional peace and security dividends through stronger cross-border collaboration. Those efforts will be considered in the framework of the United Nations regional strategy for peace consolidation, conflict prevention and conflict resolution for the Great Lakes region.

V. Conclusion

68. The generally peaceful environment in which the elections were conducted in Burundi and the ensuing smooth transition to a new leadership were testament to the

commitment of the people of Burundi to turn the page and re-embark on a path towards lasting peace and development in the country. Now more than ever, the United Nations and the international community have the opportunity to support the Government and people of Burundi in seizing the momentum ushered in through the elections. While I commend Burundi and its leadership for the progress achieved, including on security issues, I call on the Government to work together with the United Nations to sustain the gains made thus far and to advance national reconciliation, peacebuilding, social cohesion, socioeconomic development, humanitarian priorities and respect for human rights and the rule of law. In that context, I welcome President Ndayishimiye's stated good will towards the international community and take note of his six priorities. I also welcome the readiness of the Government to discuss the future of the Office of my Special Envoy for Burundi.

69. I thank the Government of Burundi for the support extended to the strategic assessment mission, which enabled its deployment to the country in full compliance with COVID-19 pandemic preventive arrangements, and all stakeholders for their active participation. I thank my Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, Huang Xia, and my Assistant Secretary-General for Africa, Bintou Keita, for jointly leading the mission. I also thank the Resident Coordinator ad interim, the members of the United Nations country team and the staff in the Office of my Special Envoy for Burundi for their contributions to this strategic assessment, and for their dedication in support of the Government and the people of Burundi. I count on their continued commitment as the United Nations and Burundi embark on this new chapter in their partnership.
