



## NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

### STRATEGIC TRENDS

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#### **AFRICA**

##### **Burundi: the alarming crisis and the spectre of the ethnic war**

Since president Pierre Nkurunziza's bid for a third term last April, Burundi is facing an increasingly alarming crisis. His announcement triggered, in an already complicated climate of tension due to the postponement of the elections and the attempted coup (May 2015), a wave of protests that is still showing no signs of ceasing. Nkurunziza, whose candidacy was judged unconstitutional at the outset but approved by the Constitutional Court afterwards, won with 69% of the votes in July, stirring up a deep dissent in the opposition. The dissent demonstrations and the simultaneous political frictions have led to the killing of at least 400 people and the exodus of some 240.000 people to neighbouring Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Democratic Republic of Congo.

A possible decisive action by the African Union vis-à-vis the crisis was shelved. In December the sending of 5.000 peacekeepers was indeed authorized, with the mission to stabilise of the situation and protect the civilians otherwise forced to flee, but it did not obtain the necessary consensus of the Burundian government. "Everyone has to respect Burundi borders. In case they violate those principles they will have attacked the country and every Burundian will stand up and fight against them", this was Pierre Nkurunziza's response to the AU programme.

To complicate the already difficult internal reality there is the diplomatic confrontation against Rwanda. Some reports drafted by UN experts talk about the presence of training camps in the country where Burundian refugees were recruited, with the involvement of Ugandan military advisers, until president Yoweri Museveni did not opt for a more indulgent policy towards Nkurunziza.

The wave of violence and deaths will not end soon, despite the opening to dialogue declared recently by Nkurunziza after Ban Ki-moon's visit in Bujumbura. This crisis can potentially expand to a regional level. The possibility of a mediation of other African leaders is unlikely to actualize, at least by the Ugandan and South African side.

What it is most likely to occur is the worsening of the ethnically motivated violence, given the intention of Paul Kagame to overthrow Nkurunziza and restore a Tutsi regime in the region with the former Burundian president Pierre Buyoya. On the other side, in the last months Nkurunziza is allegedly counting on the FDLR (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda), armed groups formed by Rwandan Hutus, in response to Rwandese interferences.

Thus the dispute between Kigali and Bujumbura looks likewise to embitter through the mutual exchange of accusations with dreadful humanitarian consequences: Burundian refugees could be forced to repatriate in their country currently afflicted by a nutritional and health crises and in which every dissenting voice is silenced.