

**Statement of Melanie H. Higgins**  
**United States Ambassador-Nominee to the Republic of Burundi**  
**Senate Committee on Foreign Relations**  
**August 6, 2020**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. It is a great honor to appear as the President's nominee to be the next U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Burundi.

I would like to acknowledge my family members, especially my husband Paul, who is a Diplomatic Security Service Agent currently serving as the Regional Security Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Mogadishu, Somalia. He may be half a world away right now, but I know he is here with me in spirit. I would also like to mention my parents, Al & Jackie Harris, and my sister Heather Yates, brother-in-law Dave Yates, and nephews Justin and Ryan.

Mr. Chairman, I come from a family that believes deeply in service to the people of the United States of America. Nearly all my relatives serve or have served in the military, law enforcement, or as teachers. In early 1998, I entered the Foreign Service and was thrilled to get my first posting in the central African country of Cameroon. I have since loved every year that I have had the privilege to represent our country. I am grateful for the confidence President Trump and Secretary Pompeo have placed in me for this nomination. If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with colleagues across the U.S. government to advance and uphold U.S. strategic interests and ideals.

Mr. Chairman, the United States has important interests in the Republic of Burundi. I have seen first-hand during my career the impact the United States can have on people worldwide. In recent years in Burundi, we saw the promise of the 2000 Arusha Agreement for more peaceful political participation disintegrate during the April 2015 political and economic crisis. Despite every effort, the East African Community's Inter-Burundi Dialogue did not produce the results we had hoped for the Burundian people. Nonetheless, this year's May 20th elections in Burundi were a significant step forward for that country and represented the first time since Burundi's 1962 independence that a Burundian president entered office peacefully through a constitutional transfer of power following a regularly scheduled election. As we see reflected in our own country, the road to freedom for all people is often not a linear path, but is rather a journey that requires constant vigilance and perseverance. I am inspired by the commitment of the Burundian people to peaceful elections, and if confirmed, look forward to working with Burundi's new government to advance mutually beneficial interests on behalf of the American and Burundian people.

Burundi sits in sub-Saharan Africa's Great Lakes region, which has seen much violence in recent decades. The United States remains Burundi's key partner in addressing food insecurity and countering health crises. Burundi is one of Africa's most densely populated countries, and Burundi's nearly 12 million people are mostly youth seeking economic opportunities that are imperative for Burundi's stability. A more prosperous Burundi and Central African region are in the strategic interests of the United States.

Burundi's new government has an opportunity to usher in a new, more vibrant era for the Burundian people. We look to the new government to fulfill the power sharing envisioned in the Arusha Accords and reverse the former government's lack of media freedom, political pressure exerted over civil society organizations, and quelling of dissenting voices. Under the previous government, opposition political parties and civil society faced restrictions, intimidation, harassment, arrest, disappearance, and even killings. The new government has an opportunity to demonstrate it will govern in a more just, open, and inclusive manner. President Ndayishimiye's announcement of plans to fight corruption and COVID-19, and the dialogues he has launched with a broad range of political and civil society stakeholders are all positive signs, but there's more work to do to bring the Burundian people the democracy they deserve. If confirmed, I will encourage government leaders to respect human rights and the rule of law. I will stress the importance of a dynamic civil society for national stability and how critical it is to strengthening our bilateral commercial ties.

Until 2015, the United States helped train and support Burundian peacekeeping troops deployed to Somalia as part of the African Union's operation there. It is in our interest to resume this much needed assistance to counter terrorism in Somalia to keep U.S. citizens safe. If confirmed, I will work with the Burundian government to increase efforts to combat trafficking in persons as a necessary step to overcome Trafficking Victims Prevention Act restrictions.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the committee, it is imperative that our bilateral dialogue and engagement respect Burundi's sovereignty and culture, but we must also be direct in discussing our concerns. If confirmed, I look forward to working with all Burundians to promote positive economic, political, and social developments in Burundi.

Our U.S. interagency team in Bujumbura, together with our highly skilled and dedicated Locally Employed Staff, are hard at work to advance America's interests. If confirmed, I would be honored to lead Embassy Bujumbura during a time when we will seek to redefine our bilateral relationship with Burundi. I also promise no goal will be more important to me than protecting the welfare of U.S. citizens living and traveling in Burundi, and I will work closely with you and the Members of this Committee on behalf of those citizens.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I welcome any questions you may have.