

**Testimony of Thomas Perriello, U.S. Special Envoy for the Great Lakes of  
Africa  
U.S. Department of State  
before the  
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U.S. Policy in Central Africa: The Imperative of Good Governance  
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Thank you Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and other Members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify today.

For the people of the African Great Lakes, 2016 is an historic year. For the United States, this year tests two decades of bipartisan investment in stability, democracy, atrocity prevention, and shared prosperity in the region. Unfortunately, we are tracking several disconcerting regional trends — closing political space, escalating conflict, and leaders determined to stay in power beyond Constitutional term-limits. Yet we also see the people of the region as committed as ever to peace, rule of law, and building a future very different from their past.

A central challenge for Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Burundi over the next year is whether their leaders will strengthen or undermine their own democratic trajectories. The stakes are high because, as we have seen in Burundi, when leaders take steps that reverse democratic progress it can risk instability and strife. In each of these countries, citizens have consistently called for democratic systems of government and put in place constitutions that set Presidential term limits to ensure regular transitions of power through free, fair, and credible elections.

Our support for democracies around the world remains a fundamental principle of U.S. policy, based on our firm conviction that democracies and rule-of-law provide the best long-term foundation for stability, dignity, and prosperity. To be successful, democracies require a respect for human rights, free media, rule of law, and the ability for citizens to peacefully organize and express dissent. They also require peaceful transitions of power between elected leaders. These principles are global and their role in our Great Lakes strategy is central.

Polling across the continent shows overwhelming support for term limits and for democratic transitions over the calcifying leadership of a few “strong men.” Half of Africans are under the age of 25, and their desire for better governance and accountable democratic institutions has been palpable during my travels to the region. As one young person from the region said to me, “Youth like me are not putting our faith in our next leader. We are putting our faith in the promise that there will be a next leader.” A much better future is within reach but, like so many of the youth across the Great Lakes region, we also see cause for concern.

Citizens and leaders in these countries must seize this historic opportunity to set their countries on a positive trajectory. The United States, the region, and the international community will provide support for these efforts; however, at the end of the day, it will be the people of the Great Lakes that determine their countries’ futures.

### **Burundi, a Cautionary Tale for the Region**

The deteriorating crisis in Burundi serves as a cautionary tale of the consequences of a leader clinging to power at the expense of his country’s foundations for stability and social cohesion. Since President Nkurunziza’s controversial decision in April 2015 to run for a third term, Burundi has descended into violence and extreme fragility, including assassinations and retaliatory attacks against government officials, opposition party members, and civil society members. Low-level conflict has become the norm, with periodic violence committed both by elements of the armed opposition and the Burundian security services. Most notably, at least 87 people – but likely several hundred – were reportedly killed on December 11 and 12 when opposition members attacked a series of military installations, followed by a prolonged crackdown by government forces, which included pulling individuals out of houses and killing them in the street.

This violence has caused a mass exodus of Burundians. Over 240,000 have fled the country, with over two hundred more leaving daily. Reporting suggests that many more want to flee the country, but are being blocked by Burundian security personnel and the ruling party’s youth militia, known as Imbonerakure. Inside the country, pervasive poverty, chronic food insecurity, and reports of rising ethnic

tension and fear are exacerbating an already dire humanitarian crisis. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and other credible international sources have reported serious human rights violations by Burundian security forces, including reports of mass graves, rape, and torture. On my most recent trip, I was told by a number of credible sources, including international NGOs and UN experts, that incidents of rape are rising inside Burundi, with most reports indicating involvement by Burundian security personnel or their allies and some reports indicating targeting of Tutsi women. The Burundian government has thus far not allowed international monitors to investigate reports of rape and gender-based violence or shown a willingness to hold its own personnel accountable for these horrific crimes.

Concerns over violence and human rights violations motivated the African Union Peace and Security Council (AU PSC) to propose a 5,000 troop civilian protection mission. However, the decision to actually deploy that force currently depends on consent from the Burundian government, which has been adamantly opposed, even to the point of threatening to attack any AU force. We are encouraged by the AU's leadership, including the recent decision to send a Head of State delegation to meet with President Nkurunziza and push for progress on regionally-backed peace talks, deployment of monitors, and contingency planning to counter potential mass atrocities.

The absence of a civilian protection force and rising concern over widespread human rights abuses underscore the urgency of deploying more human rights monitors and restoring political space and press freedoms. The Burundian government has shut down almost all media outlets and driven out the vast majority of independent journalists and civil society activists in an effort to minimize eyes and ears on the ground. Reportedly, more than 90 journalists have fled the country since the crisis began. The deployment of human rights monitors and independent experts authorized by the African Union in July 2015 continues to be thwarted by the Burundian government. The few monitors who have been allowed in the country have been systematically prevented from conducting their research according to minimal international standards. In addition, a December 17 Human Rights Council resolution also established a team of experts, which has yet to enter Burundi due to delays in processing their visas.

We continue to believe that the best route out of this crisis is a regionally-mediated dialogue amongst all Burundian stakeholders. Ugandan President Museveni convened the first meeting of this dialogue in Entebbe, Uganda, which I attended on December 28. While this was an important step that provided some deterrent force on both sides, the subsequent delays in organizing a second round may be exacerbating the conflict. I spent most of January in the region urging leaders to secure a date for the next round of talks and a promise from both sides to rejoin the dialogue without preconditions or redlines. The good news is that there remains a strong regional consensus in favor of dialogue. The unfortunate news is that there is no similar consensus on the urgency in advancing that dialogue.

In the absence of a date, and in response to the AU PSC's decision not to immediately deploy troops, there is a high probability that the conflict could escalate.

In my recent meetings with President Nkurunziza and other senior Burundian officials, I emphasized that the government's refusal to allow independent monitors and media into the country to investigate horrific allegations against them can only deepen suspicions that the government has something to hide. The deployment of the full contingent of African Union observers and civilian protection units would signal a strong commitment to protecting the people of Burundi and resolving this crisis. Even a team that could establish shared facts about events on the ground could lead to reduced violence and increased space for a political solution to the crisis.

The State Department is working closely with the interagency and with the White House to ensure that we are doing everything we can to address the humanitarian crisis and support regional efforts to find a political resolution. We are working in close coordination with the European Union to maximize pressure on the Burundian government through targeted sanctions and cuts to assistance. We are seeing indications that these negative incentives are working and helped bring the Burundian government to the table on December 28<sup>th</sup>. We are prepared to consider additional sanctions and support the EU's article 96 process, which may result in the suspension of direct EU assistance. Our priorities remain pressuring all sides to

refrain from further violence; to commit to a full-time, regionally-mediated dialogue; and to support the AU's and the UN's ongoing contingency planning.

For a decade, Burundi stood as a success story of post-conflict reconciliation with the signing and implementation of the Arusha Agreement. We continue to believe that the preservation of the principles of Arusha is fundamental to restoring stability and prosperity to the country. While the threat of civil war is imminent, time yet remains for leaders to recommit to the foundations of peace and social cohesion that could once again provide a basis for stability and progress.

### **DRC - Growing Risk of Political Confrontation**

If Burundi is the cautionary tale, the DRC is the country that retains the best chance to apply these lessons to ensure the first peaceful democratic transfer of power in its history. A political crisis is building as the DRC prepares — or rather fails to prepare — for upcoming, historic elections, scheduled for this November. This next year will determine whether the DRC builds on the significant gains of the previous decade and its role as the most democratically open country in the region, or reverses course and risks falling back into conflict and underdevelopment. If the DRC chooses the path taken by Burundi, the scale of human suffering could dwarf what we have seen next door.

A confrontation between President Kabila and those demanding timely and credible elections is not inevitable but becomes increasingly probable as the country draws closer to the constitutional deadline for elections. The Kabila administration's efforts to close citizen space and postpone the start of election preparations raise concerns that Kabila intends to try to hold onto power beyond his Constitutional term that concludes in December. Fortunately the government has not yet crossed any "points of no return" and timely and credible elections consistent with DRC's constitution are still possible.

The primary barriers to holding elections by the end of 2016 are political, not technical. While logistical and technical challenges will be sizeable, especially the need to update the voter registry, they are ultimately solvable if and when the government and others are committed to timely and credible elections. As I have

stated to President Kabila and his advisors, the DRC already held a national consultation process at the end of its 40-year dictatorship and through the Sun City process, established a constitution and a set of institutions to avoid constant re-litigation of governance questions. Its constitution outlines clear parameters for the organization of its government, and there are institutions in place, such as the DRC election commission (CENI), that can help resolve technical questions if empowered to do so. Political will remains the primary obstacle. However, uncertainty is rarely the ally of stability, and further delays could risk years of progress towards a secure DRC and raise fraught questions of what happens when the President's constitutional tenure expires in December 2016.

Adding to our concerns is the systematic escalation of repression and shrinking of political space that occurred in 2015. The DRC government has repeatedly detained opposition members and youth activists, publicly equating the opposition with enemies of the state, shutting down media outlets, and breaking up peaceful protests. On January 19, security forces across the country forcibly prevented people from gathering on church compounds to worship, threatening priests, confiscating cell phones, and arresting people.

While we support efforts by the African Union to negotiate a peaceful, Constitutional path forward with the DRC government and opposition groups, we are also working to ensure that any protests are peaceful and that any peaceful protests are not met with the repressive force that destabilized Burundi. The most prominent elements of the DRC opposition have united under the "Citizen Front" banner and are considering national actions this month ranging from a day of prayer to work strikes to mass mobilizations. We call upon the Government of the DRC to respect its people's rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. This means the government not only must allow its citizens to exercise their rights but take responsibility to ensure that they can do so peacefully. At the same time, those protesting have the responsibility to ensure that their actions remain non-violent.

There will be consequences if the DRC government repeats the extreme tactics used in January 2015, when security personnel were reportedly responsible for killing dozens of people who took to the streets to protest legislation that would

have delayed elections by a year or more. We continue to consider measures including sanctions to hold accountable individuals who threaten the peace and security of the DRC and undermine its democracy, as allowed under Executive Order 13671. Given the potential for significant violence in DRC, we will work closely with the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), particularly through the upcoming March mandate renewal, as well as the AU, regional partners, and other allies, to support MONUSCO's efforts to mitigate unrest inside the DRC and to ensure that the region is prepared to prevent any negative regional impact.

Unless a clear political path forward that respects DRC's constitution is articulated soon, we are concerned that the DRC could fall into a crisis more violent and destabilizing than the current crisis in Burundi. Nevertheless, there remains a shrinking window within which President Kabila can set the process in motion for timely and credible elections and avoid tipping his country into further uncertainty.

Kabila has an opportunity to cement his legacy in the DRC and the region, becoming not just the leader who brought his nation peace, but also the father of its Constitutional democracy and a model for his peers. We continue to stress to regional and global stakeholders the distance between the massive step forward or backwards that is at stake with this electoral cycle and DRC's first peaceful, democratic transition of power.

### **Rwanda and the absence of dissent**

Lastly, I want to discuss our multi-faceted relationship with Rwanda. Rwanda is one of the largest contributors to peacekeeping operations around the world, contributing peacekeepers to missions in the Central African Republic, Darfur, Sudan, and South Sudan; its Rwandan Formed Police Unit also serves under the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti. It also has made considerable progress toward eradicating poverty, and improving its healthcare and educational systems since its devastating genocide in 1994. Rwandans have also made great strides in reducing sexual gender-based violence and trafficking in persons, and it has the largest percentage of women serving in Parliament of any country in the

world. Our assistance and partnership with Rwanda has made significant contributions to these gains experienced by the Rwandan people.

As we work with Rwanda on furthering these gains, however, we have increasing and longstanding concerns regarding Rwanda's democratic trajectory and human rights record. We are concerned that, over time, failing to address Rwanda's weakness in these areas will erode the gains they have made on economic development. For instance, the Rwandan government has harassed, detained and some alleged, even assassinated political opponents, human rights advocates and other individuals perceived to pose a threat to the government in Rwanda and abroad.

The Rwandan government's efforts to systematically silence opposition and critical voices inside the country threatens the political pluralism and citizen space that are vital to strong democratic institutions, an entrepreneurial economy, and long-term stability. Most recently, we saw these trends converge during a rushed referendum process at the end of last year that passed constitutional amendments that allow President Kagame to serve as many as 17 more years in office. President Kagame subsequently announced in his New Years' address to the nation that he will run for a third term in 2017.

As documented in the Department of State's annual Human Rights reports, the Rwandan government has restricted freedom of expression and press freedoms, intimidating and arresting journalists who expressed critical views of the government. NGOs struggle to register due to burdensome registration and renewal requirements. The government restricts the formation of opposition parties, resulting in the existence of only one weak opposition party.

The United States is committed to increasing our investment and trade ties with Rwanda and the broader region. However, the international business community looks for stable, reliable partners, and long-term investor confidence is linked to the strength and resilience of democratic institutions that can endure peaceful leadership transitions. As Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker noted in a late January trip to Rwanda, one lesson that she learned during 27 years in the private sector is that "senior executives need to foster an environment that encourages



ideas and creativity, as well as to plan for leadership transitions that ensure that success is not based on a single leader.”

We are also concerned by reports of Rwanda engaging in destabilizing behavior related to the crisis in Burundi. There are credible reports of recruitment of Burundian refugees out of camps in Rwanda to participate in armed attacks by Burundian armed opposition against the Burundian government. Recently, I met with three Burundian former child soldiers in the DRC, who alleged that they were recruited in Rwandan refugee camps, trained in part by Rwandans, and led into the DRC en route to fight in Burundi. We have called on the Rwandan government to investigate these reports, uphold the strictly civilian character of refugee camps, and hold accountable those responsible for unlawful conduct. Any effort to recruit combatants, whether children or adults, out of refugee camps is completely unacceptable. We have also made clear that providing material support to an individual already listed under U.S. sanctions could make someone eligible to be listed themselves.

Our relationship with Rwanda understandably takes into account Rwanda’s tremendous advances in development and contributions to peacekeeping, but it also increasingly factors in our concerns about civil and human rights, and democratic principles. We raise these concerns directly and at the highest levels of the Rwandan government and look for opportunities to work together to advance fundamental freedoms. Yet the cumulative effect of these negatives trends gives us pause. We urge the Government of Rwanda to enable the full and unfettered exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association and expression, as Rwanda moves towards local elections this year, presidential elections in 2017, and parliamentary elections in 2018.

While many trends in the region cause concern — particularly the closing of political space and the weakening of Constitutions — we continue to see peoples in each country that want to be defined by the promise of the region’s future, not the personalities and ethnic tensions of its past. They share President Obama’s belief that Africa’s future will be built not on strong men but strong institutions. We hold out hope that 2016 will be a seminal year for the people of the Great Lakes in

ensuring this path forward.

