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Joint NGO Statement Urging Coordinated Global Response to the Escalating Human Rights Crisis in Burundi

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We, the undersigned organizations, urge a coordinated global response to the escalating human rights crisis in Burundi, before it is too late. With an increase in killings – many by the security forces –, inflammatory and threatening public statements by high level officials and provocative attacks on the security forces by armed opposition, the international community is being put to the test.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, at least 240 people have been killed in Burundi since April, with bodies dumped on the streets on an almost nightly basis. Speaking to the UN Security Council, Adama Dieng, Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, expressed his alarm at the “inflammatory and threatening language” being used in Burundi, noting that some of it was “very similar to language used before and during the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda.” Dieng warned that Burundi “appears on the verge of a descent into violence that could escalate into atrocity crimes,” adding that “the international community has a responsibility to protect Burundians.” The High Commissioner underscored this urgency, recommending “all possible influence must be brought to bear to halt what may be an imminent catastrophe.”

Preventive diplomacy should be more than a slogan at the United Nations. It should be brought to life through decisive action aimed at preventing serious human rights violations and crimes under international law in cases like Burundi where, as the High Commissioner noted, “member states and the Security Council can intervene effectively to prevent the repetition of past horrors.”

We call on the Government of Burundi and the opposition to urgently de-escalate this dangerous situation, and in particular to end inflammatory rhetoric. We call on the UN Security Council to impose targeted sanctions against those who incite serious crimes in Burundi; to request regular public reporting on the human rights and security situation; to support the deployment of additional human rights observers to Burundi, including to monitor any hate speech in the media and social media; to consider a joint trip to Burundi with a representative of the African Union Peace and Security Council and to reinforce the UN presence in Burundi.

Burundi is on the brink. The UN Security Council has been put on notice that inaction could lead to an uncontrolled escalation. It is now incumbent on the Council to rise to this challenge with coordinated and timely action to avert further abuses.