“Burundi and the FNL: Dialogue and Democracy”

This forum aimed to address the current state of affairs of Burundian society; more specifically, to take the pulse of the country’s democratization and reconciliation processes. As progress is made towards genuine democratization, the main concern is the country’s readiness to deal with the presidential election of 2010. All three speakers underlined the tremendous achievements Burundi has made over the past few years towards stabilizing and consolidating political space, pursuing programs in DDR and building cohesion and trust between the government, former rebel groups, and civil society.

However, the consensus was that Burundi, no longer being in a state of crisis, has dropped to the bottom of the agenda of most donor institutions, aid agencies and Western governments. This constitutes one of the country’s biggest challenges as it desperately needs the international community’s assistance at this crucial stage to effectively carry through DDR processes, strengthen its political apparatus and increase the state’s capacity to develop the health and education sectors. More so Ambassador Niyonkabo stressed the importance of private actors in developing the economy and providing jobs for the country’s youth. The international community has a vital role to play in enhancing Burundi’s attractiveness for foreign direct investment (FDI) through partnerships that increase transparency and tackle corruption problems such as that between the World Bank and the Government of Burundi.

ICG’s latest policy briefing (08/19/2008) on Burundi stresses the importance of securing the current progress through further enhancing the effectiveness of the parliament, ensuring the impartiality of the judiciary and preventing constitutional violations by the President. Concretely this would entail further political and economic reforms, including a constitutional reform that would reinforce the independence of an electoral commission. Once more the international community could provide help and expertise to assist with upcoming elections and improve the state of the nation’s security forces.

Furthermore, Mr. Wolpe’s expertise provided a precise account of the positive advances taken to build trust and cohesion at the command level of the military and amongst the leaders of the major political parties. President Nkurunziza has made dedicated efforts to meet weekly with FNL leader Agathon Rwasa allowing the two men to develop a sense of ownership of the reconciliation process. Nevertheless more needs to be done to achieve higher rates of demobilization amongst former FNL combatants, incorporate them into Burundi’s security forces and deepen the level of trust among those who were former enemies.

In short, dialogue needs to be pursued and even superseded by concrete efforts on the ground to build lasting peace and stability to Burundi. International involvement is essential to advance cohesion, trust, and transparency within Burundi if we hope to prevent the reversal of recent achievements. However, such an endeavor will not be successful if the regional context is marginalized. Just as Burundi must not be forgotten, close attention must be given to the evolution of the political contexts in neighboring DRC and Rwanda.