



## The UN Secretary-General's Reprehensible Bankrolling of Violence in Burundi

By Paula Donovan, Co-Director, AIDS-Free World and its Code Blue Campaign

**May 3, 2019:** Last week the *Washington Post* published a scathing [critique](#) by the executive director of Human Rights Watch, titled “Why the U.N. Chief’s Silence on Human Rights is Deeply Troubling.” Kenneth Roth argued that Secretary-General António Guterres “is becoming defined by his silence on human rights—even as serious rights abuses proliferate.”

That must have made things difficult for the UN spokespeople who form a human shield around António Guterres. It’s impossible to explain away the litany of recent atrocities—by Saudi Arabia, Russia, China, Syria, Congo, Myanmar, Trump—that have provoked neither comment nor condemnation from the Secretary-General.

Mr. Roth, who knows a great deal about the power of words, is absolutely right. Silence can be strategic, but sometimes it’s just spineless.

Or worse: Sometimes silence means consent. Take the [case of Burundi](#).

One is loath to believe that Mr. Guterres’ wordlessness on Burundi could possibly signal an endorsement of President Pierre Nkurunziza and the horrendous crimes he’s suspected of orchestrating against his political opponents. But with no rationale coming from the Secretary-General to explain why he’s in business with an autocratic regime while it’s being investigated by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity, we can only rely on documented facts. They speak for themselves.

The UN pays Burundi for the use of its soldiers as UN peacekeepers—some US \$13 million annually, or almost a quarter of the poverty-stricken country’s entire defense budget—and currently deploys 740 of them to its mission known as MINUSCA to “protect” the war-racked Central African Republic (CAR). The Security Council has [authorized](#) the Secretary-General to send military peacekeepers home “when there is credible evidence of widespread or systemic sexual exploitation and abuse.” It’s left to the Secretary-General to decide how much sexual violence is too much. Burundians account for one-fifth of all the UN peacekeeping soldiers since 2015 who have been formally accused by CAR women and children of rape and other sexual “misconduct,” although fewer than seven percent of MINUSCA’s current complement of 11,158 peacekeeping soldiers are contributed by Burundi.

Burundi’s behavior in CAR should surprise no one. Back at home, the Burundian army’s chain of command looks something like this: President Nkurunziza is under divine orders—heard only by him—to rule for life, and his army is under instruction to eliminate Burundian citizens who dare to

challenge that order. When the president announced four years ago that he would seek a third term, voters demonstrated in the streets, and the massacres began. Since 2016, bone-chilling official reports from independent UN investigators and commissioners have described rape, sexual torture, dismemberment, and mass murder carried out by government soldiers, police, and militia. Experts believe that the gruesome campaign is ongoing. Keeping an army loyal enough to sustain brutal levels of rape and murder against its own people, year after year, is costly. On whom can Nkurunziza depend for steady income? The answer: Secretary-General Guterres.

Even compared with the world's most notorious campaigns of state terror and mayhem, Burundi stands out. International Criminal Court investigations are rare, but alleged past and ongoing attacks by the Nkurunziza government against its own citizens have been grotesque [enough to warrant one](#), based on credible evidence of the worst of all offenses: crimes against humanity.

If there is any reasonable explanation for allowing Burundi to keep contributing peacekeepers, Nkurunziza's victims deserve to hear it from the UN Secretary-General. Why is he bankrolling their oppressor? And the women and children of CAR deserve to hear why, when their government asked the international community for peacekeepers, Mr. Guterres sent them an army notorious for raping and murdering instead.

Nkurunziza has no problem making his views heard. He angrily withdrew his country from the International Criminal Court when it announced the probe into alleged crimes against humanity (though by international law, the withdrawal was not enough to stop the ICC's investigation.) He had already forced the UN to withdraw its expert investigators and commissioners. And most recently, he expelled the UN human rights office from the country.

The withdrawals, expulsions, and denunciations have gone in just one direction. António Guterres has maintained his silence, punctured only by the sound of a pen scratching on a checkbook: Pay to the order of Pierre Nkurunziza, US \$13 million. The world is owed an explanation.

###

MEDIA CONTACT: Peter Duffy: [media@aidsfreeworld.org](mailto:media@aidsfreeworld.org), Tel: +1-646-924-1710