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## **‘The Unfolding Crisis in Burundi’**

*U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04), Chairman  
Hearing of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,  
Global Human Rights and International Organizations  
Excerpts of remarks  
July 22, 2015*

Our hearing today is extremely timely, as events are unfolding in real time in Burundi – a small nation that is often overlooked by the international community, including those of us here in Congress.

Many are familiar with the horrific genocidal violence that gripped Rwanda in the 1990s, as Hutu and Tutsi butchered each other in paroxysms of ethnic hatred.

Few know, however, that Burundi also went through a protracted Tutsi versus Hutu ethnic struggle that also amounted to genocide in the 1990s.

Few know that Burundi, without much fanfare and without the largess that the international community showered upon Rwanda, overcame its divisive civil war and, following a peace brokered by Nelson Mandela solemnized in the Arusha Accords of 2000, has sought to heal the wounds of the past and rebuild a nation.

Today, however, this peace is under the threat of unraveling. The sitting President of Burundi, Pierre Nkurunziza, in apparent defiance of the term limits set forth in the Arusha Accords and memorialized in the Constitution, is seeking a third term. While the constitutional issue is complex and unsettled, the rising political violence and tension – not to mention the roughly 160,000 people displaced and seeking refuge in neighboring countries – is easy to understand, and serves as a canary in the coal mine.

Now there is a window of opportunity for action, where immediate and sustained attention can prevent the situation from escalating out of control.

As in the case of the Central African Republic, over which we held two critical hearings in the last Congress, timely attention and targeted intervention can stop an incipient conflict from metastasizing. Burundi is now approaching a tipping point, though it has yet to topple over.

There is still time, and we in Congress have a role to play in sounding the alarm and prodding the Administration to take action, followed by oversight. We also need to avoid the temptation to be penny wise and pound foolish. As several of our witnesses will explain, by spending a small amount to further Democracy and Governance efforts in fragile states such as Burundi, we can avoid much greater cost down the road – and I mean not simply the dollar-and-cents expense of humanitarian interventions, but more importantly, in terms of blood lost and lives shattered.

In Burundi, the Administration must do more. While often-lonely voices such as that of Samantha Power have called attention to the need for atrocity prevention, too often the Administration policy has been one of, if not malign neglect, then certainly non-benign neglect.

We saw this, for example, in the foot-dragging that accompanied the appointment of a Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region. In January of this year, then-Special Envoy Russ Feingold announced that he was stepping down. This Committee called on the Administration to find a replacement as soon as possible, as the circle of violence was beginning to widen in Burundi.

In May, for example, I stated that a failure to do so signaled a “disengagement when lives are a stake.” I was afraid that we would see a repeat of the Administration’s inaction with respect to the Middle East, where to date it has yet to appoint a Special Envoy to Promote Religious Freedom of Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia despite Congress having created that position last August – almost one year ago.

At the beginning of this month, however, the Administration finally appointed a Special Envoy.

In 2012, the Administration, to much fanfare, created an Atrocities Prevention Board, following a Presidential Study directive which stated that “Preventing mass atrocities and genocide is a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States.” The APB is supposed to provide early warning of mass atrocities, and mobilize interagency resources to stop such atrocities.

In Burundi, we can still make a difference.

What next steps can be taken is something our experts today will help clarify... .