

**Reflections and Lessons on the Arusha Agreement for Peace and
Reconciliation in Burundi**

**Statement Delivered at a Conference on the Burundian Model of Consociative
Democracy**

By

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His Excellency Telesphore Irambona, Ambassador of the Republic of Burundi to China and Chairperson of African Union

Her Excellency the Minister of Sport, Youth, and Culture of the Republic of Burundi

Distinguished Ambassadors and representatives of international organizations here present

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon.

Let me from the outset on behalf of His Excellency Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, Chairperson of the AU Commission congratulate His Excellency Évariste Ndayishimiye, President of the Republic of Burundi and Chairperson of the African Union and the people of Burundi on their historic independence anniversary. I would also like to commend Ambassador Irambona for organizing this reflection session and for inviting the AU Permanent Mission to China.

You will agree with me that the Arusha Process remains one of Africa's most significant peace initiatives. The Agreement succeeded in ending large-scale civil war and creating the foundations for a political settlement.

Excellencies, I would like to share with you seven enduring lessons from the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Process for Burundi

First is that national ownership and leadership are critical for the success of any mediation process. The signing of the Arusha Accord for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi forms part of a broader set of events that constitute the Burundian peace process. While external actors played pivotal roles in the mediation process, it was the Burundians who owned and led the various processes that culminated in the current political dispensation in the country. The discreet negotiations through what was known as the “Internal Political Partnership” paved the way for a conducive climate for the commencement of comprehensive and inclusive negotiations in Arusha. Once the agreement was signed, it was Burundians who oversaw its implementation through an Implementation Monitoring Committee chaired by the Head of State with representatives of signatories of the agreement and the international community. Moreover, it was the transitional and subsequent Burundian Governments that continued negotiations to bring in the various armed groups that were not signatories to the Arusha Agreement. Credit must therefore be given to this inclusive approach which has resulted in the Burundian model of consociational democracy.

Second, is that African ownership backed by international partnership is indispensable. The OAU Summits in Egypt and Tunisia in 1995 and 1996 paved the way for the Regional Peace Initiative for Burundi and appointed the former Tanzanian President, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, as Mediator. The combination of Mwalimu Nyerere's stature in the region and familiarity with the actors and dynamics in the country coupled with that his successor in the mediation process, former President Nelson Mandela's global clout and proactive disposition contributed to overcoming some of the most complex challenges such as the "one-person, one-vote" that risked derailing the process. The Arusha Process demonstrated that durable peace is strongest when Africa takes the lead. The OAU, working closely with regional leaders, provided the political legitimacy and continental ownership that no external actor could substitute. International partners brought diplomatic, financial and technical support, but they did so in support of an African-led process rather than directing it. This model of African leadership with international partnership later became a defining feature of the AU's approach to conflict resolution.

Third is that mediators must combine moral authority with political courage. The transition from President Julius Nyerere to President Nelson Mandela illustrated that successful mediation requires different leadership qualities at different stages. Nyerere patiently built the dialogue, insisting that all voices be heard despite repeated setbacks. Mandela brought unparalleled political authority, strategic decisiveness and the confidence to press parties towards compromise. Neither sought to impose peace; instead, they challenged the parties to make the difficult choices necessary for peace. The lesson is that mediators facilitate agreements—they cannot substitute for the political will of the parties themselves.

Fourth is that process design is as important as the final agreement. The success of Arusha was not simply the product of the Agreement itself but of the architecture of the negotiations. The process was carefully structured through thematic commissions, inclusive participation, sustained consultations and patient confidence-building. Every major constituency found a place at the table, even where profound disagreements remained. Good process design creates legitimacy, builds ownership and allows difficult compromises to emerge gradually rather than being imposed prematurely.

Fifth is that security is both a prerequisite for peace and an outcome of peace. There were two critical elements relating to security.

One, was the need to ensure the security of individuals and groups returning to take part in the transitional institutions while some parties had not acceded to the agreement and continued to fight. From the onset, the protection of returning leaders and others from exile was to be guaranteed by units provided by the OAU/AU. As the OAU/AU process of standing up a mission was being worked out, and given the urgency of the situation, President Mandela dispatched South African troops pending

the deployment of what became known as the AU Mission to Burundi (AMIB); the first of its kind by the newly established organization.

Two, was the recognition that peace agreements cannot endure unless the security sector itself is transformed. Security sector reform, the integration of former combatants into unified national institutions, ceasefire arrangements and confidence-building measures were not peripheral issues—they were central to the settlement. Security must move from protecting regimes to protecting citizens. At the same time, security sector reform is never complete on the day an agreement is signed; it requires sustained political commitment over many years.

Sixth is that the availability of adequate and sustainable finance, technical and logistics support is critical for the success of any mediation process. The mediators secured sufficient financial resources for the lengthy negotiations from 1998 to 2000, thereby ensuring continuity of the process and avoiding timelines that are dictated by financial considerations. Both former President Nyerere and Mandela were directly involved in securing the financial, technical and logistics resources that were needed for the duration of the process. This gave the negotiating teams and technical experts the space to focus on resolving the critical issues without the pressure of financial consideration.

Seventh, peace is a long-term process, not a single event. Perhaps the most important lesson is that Arusha was not the end of Burundi's journey but the beginning of a long process of reconciliation, institution-building and nation-building. Agreements create opportunities—they do not automatically create peace. Peace requires continuous dialogue, inclusive governance, accountable institutions, economic opportunity and the willingness of successive generations to protect what has been achieved. The real measure of a peace process is not whether it resolves every disagreement, but whether it creates peaceful mechanisms through which future disagreements can be managed.

I would like to conclude by stating that the Arusha Process remains one of Africa's landmark demonstrations that even the deepest conflicts can be addressed through determined leadership, patient diplomacy and African ownership. The negotiation and implementation of the Arusha process constitute a historical success case in conflict resolution and national reconciliation. The Burundian spirit of Arusha anchored on dialogue and consultation has emerged over time as a guarantor of lasting peace, and a model for peacemaking.

At a time when the world is increasingly turning from dialogue towards power politics, Arusha reminds us that sustainable peace is ultimately built not through military victory, but through inclusive political settlements that create legitimate institutions capable of managing difference peacefully. That remains the enduring legacy of Presidents Nyerere and Mandela, the OAU/AU, and the people of Burundi themselves.

Burundi today is not only the Chair of the African Union for 2026, it is one of the major Troop Contributing Countries to the AU Missions in Somalia. Burundi continues to provide significant number of troops in Somalia and has paid for Somalia's stability with the blood of its soldiers. We pay tribute to the Burundian men and women who have paid the ultimate price in the service of peace under the AU flag. The AU and Somalia will forever be indebted to the Government and people of Burundi for their continued sacrifice in the service of peace in Somalia and other parts of the continent.

We commend Burundi for the tremendous progress and stability since the signing of the Arusha Agreement in 2000. We are confident that the critical lessons from that process would guide our collective efforts at Silencing the Guns on the continent.

Thank you for your kind attention.