Embassy of the United States of America

Bujumbura, Burundi

Remarks by Ambassador Dawn M. Liberi
Welcome Reception
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Welcome and good evening.

It is an honor for me to be here with you this evening. I have had a chance to meet some of you already and look forward to many more occasions when I can talk to you individually.

Let me start by expressing my sincere condolences to all of the victims and families who experienced losses as a result of the tragic fire at the central market this week. Our thoughts and prayers go out to all of them.

Tonight is for introductions so I want to share with you a little about myself and America's aspirations in the coming months.

I was honored when President Obama asked me to serve as his ambassador to Burundi. I have worked in Africa for more than 20 years in posts in Senegal, Ghana, Uganda, Nigeria and Niger. I was well aware of Burundi and had even visited here briefly in the 1990s.

I knew that this is a country of immense beauty and warm people -- a country that has known great joy and great sorrow. And I knew that it is a country with many challenges, but also opportunities. As I travel around the country and have a chance to talk to you, I hope to learn more.

During the past four years, President Obama has repeatedly talked about the importance of our partnerships in Africa. He has asked me to reaffirm our strong bilateral ties in Burundi. Ours is a partnership based on shared democratic values and our mutual interest in promoting peace, security and prosperity. Our programs improve the health of Burundians stimulate economic growth. Burundi's significant contribution to AMISOM promotes peace in the region.

I congratulate Burundi on its 50th Anniversary of Independence celebrated last year and its successful Donor Conference in Geneva.

Many have enunciated the difficulties that Burundi faces, but on this night as I begin my tenure I would like to spend some time focusing on the opportunities. And I do think they are there.

I do not want to be naïve or overly optimistic, but we have seen 'miracles' of renewal, rebirth and growth in places as varied as South Korea and Ghana. My question and challenge to you tonight is: why not Burundi?

Three areas may hold the key: democratic stability, economic growth and the well-being of its people.

After so many years of civil war, Burundi has lived in peace for nearly a decade. Despite the problems caused by the war, there is a widespread and strong commitment to reject violence and protect the peace.

During my short time here, I have already learned that all eyes are focused on the 2015 elections as Burundi takes its next step to strengthening its democracy. There is much work to be done, which requires effort and commitment from all the stakeholders.

All sides must be vigilant to insure: transparency, political dialogue, fairness, accountability and the protection of human rights.

The reasons for optimism are also there. Through the Arusha Accords, Burundi already has in place the mechanisms to insure a peaceful transition of power. It has the potential and the structure to become a model of good governance.

As someone who has spent a career working on development programs, I can assure you that this is no small accomplishment.

The second crucial area is economic growth. We all know the challenges: poverty, weak infrastructure, unemployment, lack of investment – the list goes on. But again there are opportunities.

Burundi's integration into the East African Community provides its greatest opportunity for economic advancement. Trade can be a powerful engine for job creation, economic development and improved living standards. In fact, 7 out of the 10 fastest growing economies in 2012 were in Africa.

Burundi is already showing great promise in sectors like tea and coffee and with the right support and technology these areas can become world leaders. Burundi has a ready workforce of ambitious youth who want to take on the challenges if they are given the right training and opportunities.

Everyone has a role to play, including civil society and the private sector. Government and international aid organizations can't solve the problems alone.

Finally, we need to acknowledge the toll that social and health problems –AIDS, malaria, infant and maternal mortality, population growth and malnutrition – inflict on a society. They can quickly drain the spirit and vitality of a country.

At its current growth rate, Burundi's population will double in 25 years. What kind of future will it have when there are 20 million people sharing the same space that 10 million inhabit today?

We know that healthy, empowered women can make the difference in whether a country has a future of prosperity and hope. But this is not a woman's issue. When you empower half the population to contribute to economic and social development, all benefit.

Secretary Clinton, who this week is finishing her term of office, has spoken forcefully about the crucial role of women in promoting peace and prosperity. We will continue to work on a number of levels to support Burundi's efforts to ensure the well-being of its people.

I want to leave you with a final thought. In the end, Burundians must and should decide their own future.

America will be there as a partner.

As President Obama said in his inauguration speech just last week: "America will remain the anchor of strong alliances in every corner of the globe . . .We will support democracy from Asia to Africa; from the Americas to the Middle East, because our interests and our conscience compel us to act on behalf of those who long for freedom. "

Thank you for your attention and coming this evening.