

IFRC Review of Emergency Decrees: Burundi

Overview

This document is based on research carried out up to 17 April 2020.

The first officially confirmed cases of coronavirus in Burundi occurred on 31 March 2020.¹ As at 17 April, there are officially 6 confirmed cases.² The Government announced that it would undertake appropriate tracing of people who may have been in contact with the confirmed patients. On 12 April, Burundi announced its first COVID-19 related death.³ 2936 people have been quarantined so far, with most of them returning home after 14 days, and to date, only 675 remain quarantined across the country.⁴

As a member of the East African Community (EAC), Burundi's COVID-19 response and preparedness plans are shaped by measures taken conjointly with neighbouring countries.

The Government has not yet issued an emergency decree in response to COVID-19. However, following the recommendations of the World Health Organization, Burundi has drafted a Response Plan to manage the pandemic.⁵

Despite this, the Vice-President has announced that the presidential, legislative and communal elections will go ahead as planned on 20 May, though nationals living abroad will not be able to vote.⁶ On several occasions, the Government has issued reassurances to the general population that it was not going to take any drastic measures in its fight against the COVID-19.⁷ The Ministry of Health reminded citizens that COVID-19 is not the deadliest of diseases in the country, and that citizens had to take precautionary measures for other diseases including paludism.⁸

¹ Minister of Health, "Déclaration des cas de COVID-19 au Burundi", Press release, 31 March 2020, available at <http://minisante.bi/wp-content/uploads/Communiqu%C3%A9-de-presse-1.pdf>

² Minister of Health, "Déclaration des cas de COVID-19 au Burundi", Press release, 4 April 2020, available at <https://www.facebook.com/SanteBurundi/photos/rpp.1907262205963702/2947475651942347/?type=3&theater>

³ OCHA, "Flash Update 1 Burundi: COVID-19", 8 April 2020, available at https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/covid-19_flash_update_burundi_14042020_en.pdf

⁴ Minister of Health, "Déclaration des cas de COVID-19 au Burundi", Press release, 8 April 2020, available at https://twitter.com/mspls_bdi/status/1247908651341426688/photo/2

⁵ Government of Burundi, submission to the World Bank, Project information document, p.5, 1 April 2020, available at <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/581521585906986734/Project-Information-Document-Burundi-COVID19-Preparedness-and-Response-Project-P173845>

⁶ IWACU, "Burundi, Covid-19 Pas de question d'ajourner les élections", available at <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/burundi-covid-19-pas-de-question-dajourner-les-elections-dixit-gaston-sindimwo/>

⁷ Government of Burundi, "Communiqué du gouvernement relatif au Corona-virus", Press release, 2 April 2020, available at <https://twitter.com/BurundiGov/status/1245785111599239168/photo/1>

⁸ Minister of Health, "Déclaration des cas de COVID-19 au Burundi", Press release, 2 April 2020, available at https://twitter.com/mspls_bdi/status/1245752284707016706/photo/2

1. Is there coordination between state and non-state actors, e.g. through a national emergency response mechanism?

There is no specific reference to coordination with non-state actors. The United Nations Commission on inquiry in Burundi has explicitly called on the Burundian authorities to cooperate closely with international and non-governmental organisations and to immediately implement the recommendations of the World Health Organisation.⁹ The Commission also stressed the need to develop, as quickly as possible, a plan to counter the threat of coronavirus and to provide assistance to persons who need it, through its own resources or by seeking international assistance and cooperation if its resources were found to be insufficient.¹⁰

Despite the lack of a national coordination mechanism, there have been collaborations between The Red Cross and Burundian authorities. In a joint communiqué issued on 7 April,¹¹ the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Burundi Red Cross Society announced the setting up of a response strategy to reduce the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the most vulnerable communities. As part of the strategy, hygiene and protective equipment (hand washing devices, soap and cleaning products) for places of detention have been handed over to the Directorate General of Penitentiary Affairs in order to prevent a potential spread in prisons. Handwashing devices and soap have been distributed in the 150 health centres in Bujumbura's town hall and in several public places throughout the country. The materials were accompanied by awareness-raising sessions.¹²

Posters and radio spots will be designed for raising awareness of the general public in conjunction with the Burundi Red Cross.¹³

Aside from this initiative, the Ministry of Public Security and Disaster Management has partnered with the World Health Organisation and is organising briefing sessions on the virus for several civil servants, in order to spread awareness of the disease.¹⁴

⁹ Statement from the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi: transparency, compliance with human rights international standards and humanitarian assistance are essential in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, 10 April 2020, available at

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=25790&LangID=E>

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ Burundi-eco, “Le Mouvement international de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge se mobilise pour faire face à la pandémie de Covid-19 au Burundi”, available at

<http://burundi-eco.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Croix-Rouge.pdf>

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ IWACU, “le CICR et la Croix-Rouge du Burundi à l’oeuvre”, 8 April 2020, available at <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/burundi-covid-19-le-cicr-et-la-croix-rouge-du-burundi-a-loeuvre/>

¹⁴ IWACU, “Le Ministère de la Santé et de la Gestion des Catastrophe se mobilise”, 2 April 2020, available at <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/covid-19-le-ministere-de-la-securite-publique-et-de-la-gestion-des-catastrophes-se-mobilise/>

2. Is there mention of the role of Red Cross (RC) or humanitarian actors? In what areas/sectors? What responsibilities are ascribed to RC?

COVID-19 Framework

There is no specific mention of humanitarian actors in Burundi's national COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan. The latter does mention however that its aims is to “strengthen[] aspects of preparedness and response including coordination, surveillance, case management, communication and social mobilization, psychosocial as well as logistics and safety.”

General disaster management framework

At the level of the East African Community, general disaster response for epidemics is handled through the Regional Contingency plan for Epidemics.¹⁵ Notably, the Contingency Plan mentions that the Red Cross may form part of a group of multi-sectoral experts, referred to as the “Rapid Response Team”, which is deployed during activation of the Contingency Plan.¹⁶ The regional Contingency plan also states more generally, “key drivers that will underpin the successful implementation of the plan include the private sector, Civil Society Organizations and communities.”¹⁷

3. Are there exceptions to travel restrictions that will facilitate the movement of RC/humanitarian relief teams and/or aid across borders? What (if any) quarantine requirements or other conditions are attached?

The Government has issued some travel restrictions set out below, in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus, including banning all commercial flights to and from Bujumbura airport, as set out below. There are however express exceptions for cargo flights, ambulance flights, flights with humanitarian purposes and diplomatic flights, which are exempted from the restrictions.¹⁸ It is likely that humanitarian relief teams and aid from the Red Cross would fall under this category.

It should also be noted that the UN Commission of Inquiry for Burundi has emphasised that: “Measures taken to control the spread of the coronavirus should not disrupt the supply chains vital to the availability of essential products or the delivery of humanitarian assistance.”¹⁹

¹⁵ The East African Community General Contingency Plan for Epidemics due to Communicable Diseases, Conditions, and other events of public health concern, (2018-2023), available at <https://www.eac.int/coronavirus>

¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 9-10.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.E.

¹⁸ Burundi-eco, “Le Commerce Burundais phagocité par le COVID-19”, 10 April 2020, available at <http://burundi-eco.com/le-commerce-burundais-phagocyte-par-le-covid-19/#.XpCSi1NKiqA>

¹⁹ Statement from the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi: transparency, compliance with human rights international standards and humanitarian assistance are essential in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, 10 April 2020, available at

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=25790&LangID=E>

Air travel restrictions

All inbound travellers are required to undergo a 14 day quarantine upon their arrival.²⁰ The government has confirmed that the cost of quarantine is charged to the travellers.²¹

On 19 March, The Minister of Foreign Affairs declared that the issuance of visas was suspended until further notice, with the exception of visas renewed to travellers already in Burundi.²²

On 20 March 2020, The Government announced in a press release that all citizens living abroad should abstain from flying back into Burundi until further notice.²³

On 4 April, the Minister of Transport announced that the suspension of all international commercial flights to and from Melchior Ndadaye airport, which was originally announced to last only seven days on 22 March, would be prolonged for an additional 14 days.²⁴ The measure is to remain under frequent review. As mentioned above, cargo flights, ambulance flights, flights with humanitarian purposes and diplomatic flights are however exempted from this restriction.²⁵ The crews must however undergo a medical screening before being granted access to the territory of Burundi.²⁶

Land border closure

Though the Government had closed borders with the DRC and Rwanda for two weeks, it announced on 14 April that trucks carrying goods would be permitted to enter into the country, “to allow the continuity of the free movement of goods as agreed by East African Community members”.²⁷ In a Joint Statement by the East African Community, member states agreed that cargo trucks and vehicle carrying goods must:

- i. Have only 2 - 3 crew members per vehicle to facilitate smooth border crossing in the region;

²⁰ Pandemic International, “Travel restrictions, flight operations and screenings”, available at <https://pandemic.international.com/2019-ncov/ncov-travel-restrictions-flight-operations-and-screening>

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² IWACU, “Tous les vols commerciaux internationaux suspendus pour 7 jours”, 22 March 2020, available at <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/covid-19-tous-les-vols-commerciaux-internationaux-suspendus-pour-7-jours/>

²³ Minister of Health, “Déclaration des cas de COVID-19 au Burundi”, Press release, 31 March 2020 available at https://twitter.com/mspls_bdi/status/1241013386244169728/photo/2

²⁴ XINHANET, “Burundi extends suspension of international commercial flights for the second time”, 4 April 2020, available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/04/c_138945410.htm

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ IWACU, “Tous les vols commerciaux internationaux suspendus pour 7 jours”, 22 March 2020

²⁷ IWACU, “Burundi reopens borders with Rwanda DRC to goods trucks”, 16 April, 2020, available at <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/englishnews/burundi-reopens-borders-with-rwanda-drc-to-goods-trucks/>

- ii. Crew members [should be] in good health, crew are screened and found to be at high risk or positive for COVID-19, the truck will be decontaminated before it is allowed to continue to its final destination and the crew members will be quarantined for 14 days according to the set national guidelines;
- iii. In the event that the crew are quarantined while in transit, truck owners / operators make necessary arrangements to backup crew to ensure that goods are delivered to the intended destination;
- iv. Truck drivers are required to declare their final destination and are urged to stop only at designated points along the transport corridors so as to limit chances of spread of COVID-19 during transit;
- v. The crew for cargo planes and vessels will be determined by the specifications of the aircraft or ship and set international guidelines. The crew will be quarantined at a government designated hotel for the period of their stay.”²⁸

4. Are there exceptions to quarantines, curfews and other restrictions on movement that allow RC/humanitarian organizations access to vulnerable populations (including for psychosocial or non-medical aid)?

To date, there is no general curfew or confinement imposed in Burundi. Schools have not yet closed, and large gatherings are still taking place. Easter Masses took place this month,²⁹ and football matches are also due to continue.³⁰ Presidential, legislative and district councilor elections scheduled for 20 May are still expected to take place, despite the virus.³¹ Burundians living abroad will however not be able to vote.³²

Some measures curbing freedom of movement have been adopted and are set out below. To date, there are however no comprehensive measures in place to allow humanitarian organizations to access the most vulnerable populations.

²⁸ Joint Statement by the Ministers responsible for health and east African Community Affairs on COVID-19 Preparedness and Response in East African Community Region, 25 March available at <https://www.eac.int/statements/1705-joint-statement-by-the-ministers-responsible-for-health-and-east-african-community-affairs-issued-on-25th-march-2020-on-covid-19-preparedness-and-response-in-east-african-community-region>

²⁹ Courrier International, “Restrictions Coronavirus Burundi: comme si de rien n’était, ou Presque”, 13 April 2020, available at <https://www.courrierinternational.com/une/restrictions-coronavirus-au-burundi-comme-si-de-rien-netait-ou-presque>

³⁰ Africa News, “Burundi’s Football season continues amidst threat of the virus”, 8 April 2020, available at <https://www.africanews.com/2020/04/08/burundi-s-football-season-continues-amidst-threat-of-the-virus/>

³¹ IWACU, “Burundi Suspends Presidential Elections for Burundians living abroad amid Covid-19 outbreak”, 17 April 2020, available at <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/englishnews/burundi-suspends-presidential-election-for-burundians-living-abroad-amid-covid-19-outbreak/>

³² *Ibid.*

Isolation and quarantine measures

The Minister of Health of Burundi asked people who have been in contact with confirmed COVID-19 patients to self-isolate.³³

Travellers are also required to quarantine upon arrival in Burundi.³⁴ Some humanitarian organisations, and the UN, have raised concerns about the conditions in which people are forced to quarantine. Human Rights Watch mentioned the lack of water or toilets available in some facilities.³⁵ As mentioned previously, people placed in quarantine are also doing so at their own expense.³⁶ The UN Commission of inquiry for Burundi has voiced concerns that “some humanitarian organisations were refused access to sites where persons were quarantined in deplorable conditions when they should have been provided with food, clean water and access to health facilities and medical services.”³⁷ The Commission further stressed the importance of access to medical facilities and medical health for all,³⁸ and recalled that: “Any obstacles to humanitarian and health operations should be lifted immediately”.³⁹

Prisons

The Government has banned visits to prisons in an effort to prevent the spread of the virus.⁴⁰ The UN Commission on Inquiry for Burundi has called upon the Government of Burundi to take additional precautionary measures and apply the interim UN guidance regarding persons deprived of their liberty.⁴¹

General Precautions

³³ “Déclaration des cas de COVID-19 au Burundi”, Press release, 2 April 2020, available at <http://www.rtnb.bi/fr/art.php?idapi=4/1/50>

³⁴ Pandemic International, “Travel restrictions, flight operations and screenings”.

³⁵ SOS Médias Burundi, “Plus de 725 Burundais places en quarantaine”, 26 March 2020, available at <https://www.sosmediasburundi.org/2020/03/26/plus-de-725-burundais-places-en-quarantaine-burundi-tanzanie-rdc/>; see also Human Rights Watch, “Toute tentative de dissimulation du COVID-19 mettra des vies en danger”, available at <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2020/03/31/burundi-toute-tentative-de-dissimulation-du-covid-19-mettra-des-vies-en-danger>

³⁶ SOS Médias Burundi, “Près de 3000 personnes placés en quarantaine”, 9 April 2020, available at <https://www.sosmediasburundi.org/2020/04/09/burundi-covid-19-pres-de-3-000-personnes-placees-en-quarantaine/>

³⁷ OHCHR, Statement from the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi: transparency, compliance with human rights international standards and humanitarian assistance are essential in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, 10 April 2020.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ IWACU, “Eviter un drame dans nos prisons”, 17 April 2020, available at <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/eviter-un-drame-dans-nos-prisons/>

⁴¹ WHO and OHCHR, Interim Guidance, COVID-19: Persons Deprived of their Liberty, March 2020, available at <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-03/IASC%20Interim%20Guidance%20on%20COVID-19%20-%20Focus%20on%20Persons%20Deprived%20of%20Their%20Liberty.pdf>

The Minister of Health published a list of precautionary measures which must be respected by citizens, including washing of hands, banning shaking hands when greeting others.⁴²

5. Have any special legal facilities or exemptions been put in place for the importation of medical aid or other relief items or personnel (International Disaster Response Law)? What (if any) quarantine requirements or other conditions are attached?

Again, there are no special legal facilities put in place for the importation of medical aid. There are however exceptions to flight restrictions for flights with a humanitarian purpose.⁴³ The Red Cross is recognised as a humanitarian organisation auxiliary to the public services by the Government of Burundi since 1963,⁴⁴ and could therefore presumably benefit from the exemptions, should restrictions be put in place at a later date.

6. Is the RC (or humanitarian organizations) categorized as 'essential' or 'emergency' services, for the purposes of exemptions to restrictions on business operations and opening hours?

As mentioned above, Burundi has not yet imposed any national curfew, or restriction to business hours.

It should be noted however that the Government recognises the importance of the Red Cross intervention in cases of emergency in collaboration with national institutions, and is thus likely to grant it special treatment.⁴⁵

7. What other measures are provided in the emergency decrees? (for governmental actors, for communities, for health workers, etc).

International assistance

- The East Africa Community has supported the setting up of nine laboratories in Burundi to increase medical capacity. The government Burundi stated that it currently possesses only one laboratory capable of testing COVID-19 cases.⁴⁶
- On 14 April, the World Bank approved a \$5 million grant from the International Development Association to respond to the threat posed by COVID-19 and strengthen

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⁴⁴ Accord-Cadre de Partenariat entre le Gouvernement de la République du Burundi et la Croix-Rouge du Burundi, p. 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Government of Burundi, submission to the World Bank, Project information document, p.5, 1 April 2020, available at <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/581521585906986734/Project-Information-Document-Burundi-COVID19-Preparedness-and-Response-Project-P173845>

national systems for public health preparedness in Burundi.⁴⁷ The aim is to provide immediate support to Burundi to prevent COVID-19 cases and restrain local transmission through containment strategies. It will also train health personnel and provide equipment to laboratories at national and decentralized levels. It will prepare and equip health facilities to treat patients and help develop efficient mechanisms for community-based disease surveillance and communication.⁴⁸

National observations

- The Government of Burundi has noted that the response to COVID-19 build on lessons from the preparation to respond to the Ebola outbreak. Preparation for Ebola in Burundi started in 2018 and contributed to strengthen the country's capacities in several areas, such as the strengthening of infection prevention and control measures and epidemiological surveillance.⁴⁹
- The price of basic necessities has risen since the first case of COVID-19 was declared in Burundi.⁵⁰
- There have been reports of certain parts of the country lacking basic access to water, and there are fears that this could lead to greater risks of infection.⁵¹

8. Have restrictions been adopted or put in place that ban the export of protective medical equipment?

To date, no restrictions have been put in place to ban the export of protective medical equipment. It should be noted that Burundi does not possess sufficient general medical equipment to combat the virus.⁵² It is therefore unlikely to be in a position to export any medical equipment abroad.

⁴⁷ <https://www.africanews.com/2020/04/14/coronavirus-burundi-to-strengthen-national-health-system-and-preparedness-in-the-face-of-covid-19/>

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Government of Burundi, submission to the World Bank, Project information document, p.6, 1 April 2020.

⁵⁰ IWACU, “Les prix des denrées alimentaires sont en hausse malgré l’annonce d’une bonne production”, 9 April 2020, available at <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/les-prix-des-denrees-alimentaires-sont-en-hausse-malgre-lannonce-dune-bonne-production/>

⁵¹ IWACU, “Pénuries d’eau potable à Gikungu, le spectre du COVID-19 plane”, 14 April 2020, available at <https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/penurie-deau-potable-a-gikungu-i-le-spectre-du-covid-19-plane/>

⁵² Global Giving Projects, available at <https://www.globalgiving.org/projects/burundi-relief-fund-for-covid-19/>