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For immediate release

Humanity & Inclusion (Handicap International) closes Burundi program

Montreal — Humanity & Inclusion, which operates under its original name “Handicap International” in Burundi since 1992, has been forced to stop its activities in the country. It no longer considers itself able to carry out its projects due to the Burundian government's recent decisions towards international NGOs, in particular the obligation to keep a record of its employees’ ethnicities.

The government of Burundi suspended the actions of all international NGOs present in Burundi on October 1, 2018. The primary condition for their restart is, among other things, a plan to set up ethnic quotas for their staff.

Humanity & Inclusion has tried to respond to the government's requests in accordance with the humanitarian principles and its values, and has engaged in discussions with the government to this end, without finding a solution. During a meeting on December 24, 2018, the Burundian Ministry of the Interior confirmed that the conditions set by the government were "non-negotiable" and that if they were not met by December 31, 2018, Humanity & Inclusion would not be allowed to resume its activities.

Committed to the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, Humanity & Inclusion considers that the obligation to record the ethnic composition of its staff and to communicate this information to the authorities constitutes a red line that it will not cross. The association always acts in compliance with the laws of the countries in which it operates and considers the practice of positive discrimination acceptable when it comes to giving access to employment to groups known to be ignored because of their gender or disability, for example. However, it cannot consider instituting an ethnic record of its staff in a country where ethnicity does not appear on identity papers.

This obligation forced upon NGOs has its roots in the quota system detailed in the Constitution for all structures and institutions of the Burundian State, including the public administration and the defence and security forces. But the Constitution only refers to sectors of the State, not civil society. Article 22 of the Burundian Constitution also states that “no one may be discriminated against on the grounds of [...] ethnicity”. In addition, article 6 of the Burundian Labour Code states that “the law ensures equality of opportunity and treatment in employment and work for everyone, without any discrimination. It precludes any distinction, exclusion or preference based on [...] ethnic or social origin with regard to recruitment, promotion, remuneration and termination of contract.”



The ethnic identification process and its corresponding annual audit imposed by the Burundian authorities may be prerequisites for farther-reaching measures whose scope we do not know at this stage. Humanity & Inclusion will not be complicit in any form of ethnic discrimination. The association accepts the consequences of this decision, and with great regret is closing its program in Burundi, after 26 years of presence and intervention in the fields of health, rehabilitation, education, protection, socio-economic integration and support to associations. The association deplores the fact that the capacity of NGOs to act is increasingly being reduced in this country, which is among the poorest in the world, to the detriment of the most vulnerable Burundian populations.

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Regional experts available for comment

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About Humanity & Inclusion

Humanity & Inclusion (the new name of Handicap International) is an independent international aid organization. It has been working in situations of poverty and exclusion, conflict and disaster for 36 years. Working alongside people with disabilities and vulnerable groups, our action and testimony focus on responding to their essential needs, improving their living conditions, and promoting respect for their dignity and basic rights. Since its founding in 1982, HI has set up development programs in more than 60 countries and intervenes in numerous emergencies. The network of eight national associations (Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States) works constantly to mobilize resources, jointly manage projects and to increase the impact of the organization's principles and actions. HI is one of six founding organizations of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), co-winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997; and winner of the 2011 Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize. HI takes action and campaigns in places where "living in dignity" is no easy task.