

## **BURUNDI: an exceptional case of fighting the COVID-19 Pandemic against the backdrop of a presidential election.**

The Republic of Burundi registered its first two confirmed cases of Coronavirus on 31st, March 2020. According to the Minister of Health, these included two people who had returned from countries already affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The announcement was made in the context of the preparations for the presidential election, which was scheduled to take place on 20 May, 2020. Following that, the Burundian authorities continued to issue messages downplaying the danger posed by the new virus, made religious invocations and called for calm, asking the population not to panic.

### **Government measures put in place**

Nevertheless, despite the apparent optimism, the Government of Burundi gradually put in place restrictive measures to contain the spread of the pandemic. These included:

- Systematic testing of contacts of confirmed cases.
- Closure of Bujumbura International Airport and ban of flights, with the exception of cargo, medical and diplomatic flights.
- Closure of border posts, with the exception of road transport of food products and other cargo transport.
- Returning persons were subjected to quarantine of 14 days in hotels and other centres set up for this purpose.
- An awareness-raising campaign on measures to contain the spread of the virus was initiated. This consisted of frequent hand washing with soap, avoiding handshakes and maintaining a social distance of one metre.

These were minimal measures that reflected the political will to fight the pandemic and avoid slowing down normal life. Be that as it may, the shadow of the upcoming presidential election continued to lurk in the background.

In this context, businesses and shops continued their activities; a normal return to school took place on April 19, after the Easter holidays; the Football Federation decided to resume their championship; and the local election campaign that had already begun was carried on.

### **Challenges to the implementation of preventive measures**

Admittedly, the Burundian government seems to have got the situation under control, notwithstanding some difficulties it encountered at the beginning of the implementation of the measures.

For example, truck trailers transporting goods from the ports of Dar-es-Salam in Tanzania and Mombassa in Kenya through Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda were banned from crossing the border between Burundi and Rwanda. This was despite the 25th March, 2020 declaration of the meeting of Ministers of Health that called for compliance with the protocol on the free movement of goods between member states of the East African Community (EAC) during this period.

It is also worth noting the incident that occurred on 2 April in one of the communes, against the backdrop of tensions during the election campaign. Two Burundian citizens returning from neighbouring Tanzania were killed by unknown assailants while on their way under guard to a quarantine centre for COVID-19 patients. The government was quick to call local

officials to order for strict adherence to protective measures for those who should be quarantined.

In view of this situation, it should be noted that in the short term there is no major impact on socio-economic life, given that the large part of the population lives mainly from agriculture and in rural areas.

On the other hand, speculative price increases were noted, but the situation was quickly brought under control.

Some businesses that offer mainly imported products have experienced a decline in activity due largely to the lack of products and customers who are mostly expatriates.

### **Union intervention**

Reports indicate that the Confederation of Trade Unions of Burundi (COSYBU) immediately joined the management of the national response against the spread of COVID-19.

COSYBU has identified viable short-, medium- and long-term solutions for individuals, communities, trade unions, employers' associations and their affiliates.

COSYBU affiliates, in particular the health workers' union, initiated a bi-tripartite project with the employers' association of Burundi to solicit financial and technical support for the joint development and implementation of a multi-sectoral strategic platform to support workers and business owners affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social partners were set to achieve the following objectives:

- Building the resilience of the labour market through local social dialogue;
- adapting protective equipment and occupational health and safety advice ;
- providing accurate information to limit the impact of sudden unemployment and loss of income arising from the adverse consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- intensifying campaign for compliance with the measures taken by the Government.

More concretely, COSYBU, in collaboration with its affiliates, already distributed 650 masks, 650 bottles of disinfectants, 60 buckets containing water with chlorine in 8 meetings held in 22 vulnerable workplaces to set an example.

Again, unlike many countries around the world, Burundi celebrated May Day, the International Workers' Day, with rallies and parades, as usual.

The trade union representative's speech focused mainly on respect for workers' rights; the appeal to workers and employers for strict observance of social distancing measures in the workplace and elsewhere; and the appeal to the Government to facilitate the acquisition of protective equipment and to grant tax benefits.

COSYBU also requested an urgent meeting of the social partners to determine the appropriate measures to help the population - workers and businesses affected by the consequences of COVID-19, in particular, those affected by reduction in income, the closure of businesses, technical unemployment, and the decline of informal economy activities.

## **Conclusion**

One of the Burundian leaders indicated that Burundi was an exception among other nations because was specially favored by God.

As far as the management of the pandemic is concerned, Burundi approach has been different and atypical, probably because of what was at stake politically in respect of its presidential elections. Generally, the population has been more concerned about the presidential election than about the danger posed by the coronavirus.

Relying on the low number of cases compared to other countries in the sub-region, notwithstanding the fact that the number of tests carried out is among the lowest in Africa (24 per 1 million inhabitants. [www.worldometers.info/coronavirus](http://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus)), Burundi could be a case study to be analysed in depth at the end of the cycle, if the situation does not deteriorate in the medium term.

It should be noted that COSYBU and its affiliates have shown courage and determination in a rather complex context. Beyond their contribution to the debate and to the application of the directives issued by the Government, they must continue to remain lucid and vigilant in order to anticipate any negative effects that may result from an inappropriate management of the COVID-19 pandemic and which would jeopardize the economy and the well-being of workers and the population.