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PRESS RELEASE

Special Parliamentary Commission on Belgium's Colonial Past: A closure in December 2022 will not allow it to complete its mandate

15 June 2022

The Special Parliamentary Commission on Belgium's colonial past was initially given a one-year mandate until July 2021. Last month, its mandate was extended for a second and final time until December 2022. These extensions are a welcome recognition that the commission needs to have a sufficient timeframe to complete its ambitious mandate. The commission has been tasked not only with looking into Belgium's colonial actions in the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi but also to assess the long-term structural impact of these actions and to make suggestions on how this should be addressed. However, the signatories of this press release are concerned that closing the commission only two and a half years after its creation will leave it unable to satisfactorily fulfil its mandate: to address Belgium's colonial past and to propose measures to offer redress for the grave crimes committed during colonial rule and the continuing impact colonialism has in today's society.

To be effective and legitimate, transitional justice processes such as truth commissions and commissions of investigation need to fulfil certain criteria. Particularly important is the need for participative processes. The commission has organised public hearings in which a diversity of academics, policy officials and civil society actors (including two sessions specifically with diaspora organisations) have been invited to testify and share their expertise on specific issues. But time and resource constraints have otherwise limited the commission's visibility and public engagement strategies.

We regret the weakness of the communication strategy and outreach processes established by the commission. Only a handful of commissioners publicly communicate about its activities and regretfully some commissioners have even expressed their doubts about the necessity of dealing with the colonial past. While information about the commission's working methods and hearings are publicly available on the federal parliament's website, the signatories observe that the commission's activities remain largely under the radar within Belgian society, and can even be said to be invisible in the DRC, Burundi and Rwanda.

From the outset, there has also been a limited ability of the commission to more broadly consult populations in Belgium, the DRC, Burundi and Rwanda. Consequently, the work of the commission has remained disconnected from popular perceptions of what meaningfully engaging with the colonial past might mean. There has, in particular, so far been little engagement of the commission with the DRC, Burundi and Rwanda directly. The signatories therefore welcome plans, as yet unconfirmed, for the commission to travel to the region. Such a delegation should strive to meet with both state officials and civil society organisations in all three countries. Local stakeholders should also be given the opportunity to submit written

statements to the commission. In addition, the commission delegation could take advantage of such a visit to explore possible avenues for future cross-national initiatives between the four countries to deal with the colonial past.

The signatories further call on the commission to give itself the necessary means and time to comprehensively and credibly deal with the two outstanding, and also most politically sensitive issues, namely reparations and the link between colonialism, present-day racism and postcolonial injustices (public hearings on these are planned for over the summer).

While recognition of the nature and impact of Belgian colonialism would be an important outcome of the commission's work, this needs to be accompanied with concrete proposals for a comprehensive reparative justice agenda. Beyond this, the commission should also consider developing proposals for supplementary measures or mechanisms which can fill the gaps left by the special parliamentary commission. A key legacy the special parliamentary commission should strive for is not of closing the debate on Belgium's colonial past but of opening the door for further engagements, by all stakeholders involved, to comprehensively reckon with Belgium's colonial past.

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