

New massacres in Burundi civil war

John Farmer
22 September 1999

The gruesome massacres that took place in Burundi on August 28 and 29 indicate a further upsurge in the country's civil war. Reports have emerged of the killings of 32 men, women and children, according to the military government, and of over 250 lives lost, according to the rebels. Government and rebels each hold the other responsible for the deaths. In what is termed a "dangerous turn of events" by Western security officials in Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, the army has begun rearming and reorganising Tutsi militias—notorious for carrying out ethnic attacks—said to be in response to the August massacres.

Burundi has a population of around 5.5 million and borders Rwanda to the north and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the west. The history and composition of the Burundi population is similar to that of its slightly larger neighbour Rwanda—particularly in relation to ethnic strife. When Rwanda became world news in 1994 as a result of the attempted genocide against the minority Tutsis by the majority Hutu regime—in which up to one million were slaughtered—similar events were taking place in Burundi, but on a smaller scale.

Civil war has continued in Burundi since 1993 with the loss of approximately 200,000 lives. The present Tutsi-dominated regime, led by Major Buyoya, seized power through a military coup in 1996. Buyoya was previously in power before 1993 when he organised elections in response to demands from the western powers. Melchior Ndadaye, of the mainly Hutu Burundi Democratic Front (FRODEBU), was elected president by an overwhelming majority. He became the first Hutu head of state since independence in 1962, even though 85 per cent of the Burundi population are Hutus. During a five year transition period before 1993, Buyoya had co-opted Hutus into his government and the ruling Party for Unity and National Progress (UPRONA), hoping to maintain rule by claiming to be

no longer ethnically biased. When his plan failed, the Tutsi-dominated army made sure the FRODEBU government was unviable.

After being in office for just over three months, Ndadaye was assassinated by elements in the army. For several days the assassination of Ndadaye created chaos as Hutus took revenge, in some areas killing Tutsis of the UPRONA party. The resulting crackdown by the army led to further massacres, with some 50,000 Hutus and Tutsis being killed.

After the assassination of Ndadaye, the army permitted nominal civilian rule by the surviving members of his government and Cyprien Ntaryamiri became president, but he lasted for an even shorter period than his predecessor. Ntaryamiri was killed as he accompanied the Hutu president of Rwanda in the latter's aircraft, which was shot down over Kigali. The government effectively lost control as the army expanded and set up para-military groups, "sans-echecs", which are responsible for the "ethnic cleansing" of the Bujumbura area and for political assassinations.

In opposition, Hutu-dominated militia groups developed. These included the ethnically exclusive Party for the Liberation of the Hutu People (PALIPEHUTU) but also the larger Forces for the Defence of Democracy (FDD). The latter is led by Leonard Nyagoma, who was interior minister in the FRODEBU government, but who broke away when he recognised it had no power. Whilst Buyoya's seizure of power again in 1996 was supposed to bring stability, the civil war between the Hutu rebels and the army has continued.

The civilian population is the main victim in the conflict between the military regime of President Buyoya and the rebel organisations. About one million refugees have been forced to abandon their homes. Three hundred camps in Burundi hold around 60,000

people, 500,000 people are displaced within Burundi and 300,000 refugees are in neighbouring countries, particularly Tanzania. Human rights groups describe how in 1997, in order to destroy rebel bases, the army massacred thousands of unarmed civilians and drove thousands more of them into little more than concentration camps.

The percentage of the rural population living below the poverty line rose from 35 percent in 1990 to 58 percent in 1997, and between 1992 and 1996 poverty in the urban population rose from 33 to 66 percent. Education has suffered a comparable decline; in 1993 over two thirds of children attended primary schools, in 1996 it was less than half.

The economy of Burundi, already one of the poorest countries in Africa, has fallen into sharp decline. Since the 1996 coup, western governments have imposed sanctions that have caused further deterioration. Production levels have fallen by 5 percent each year since 1993—manifested particularly in the coffee industry where 80 per cent of Burundi's foreign earnings are realised. The budget deficit is running at 30 per cent and the government has responded by printing more paper money, forcing up inflation; prices of basic food have risen by 120 percent. Foreign investment has fallen by a staggering 80 per cent.

As in Rwanda, the ethnic conflict is not the survival of an ancient tribal past but the product of the political framework established under the colonial rule of Belgium from 1924 to 1962. The Belgian colonialists used the traditional authority of the King, chiefs, and sub-chiefs to impose its order through indirect rule, which favoured the Tutsi minority in both education and appointments to the administration. Prior to colonialism, Burundi was a semifeudal nation in which all tribal groups shared the same culture, language and religious beliefs. The exacerbation of tribal divisions under Belgian rule left a terrible legacy. Three years after independence was granted, the first ethnically based massacres were carried out. Then in 1972, under the corrupt regime of Michel Micombero, the army carried out a massacre of 300,000 Hutus and created 500,000 refugees. Colonel Jean Baptiste Bagaza replaced Micombero in a palace coup in 1976. While Bagaza officially denied the existence of ethnic groups, he excluded Hutus from secondary and higher education.

Major Pierre Buyoya came to power in 1987, overthrowing the discredited Bagaza in a bloodless coup. Buyoya's army cracked down after ethnic discord broke out in 1988, massacring thousands of mainly Hutu Burundians and creating tens of thousands of refugees. The government refused to respond to a call for a commission of inquiry into what had taken place and the discrepancy between official reports of 5,000 people killed and independent accounts of 20,000 deaths.

It is this history of colonial oppression and ethnic division that has led to the present civil war. The conflicts between the rival cliques contending for power are not only along ethnic lines but also include regional differences. There has been fighting between the various Hutu-dominated rebel factions. Western governments are now concerned that the Burundi civil war will impact on the war in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). As well as the deployment of Burundi government troops alongside Rwandan and Ugandan forces in the Congo war, there are reports that both the FDD and PALIPEHUTU have links with the Interhamwe Hutu militia forces who are fighting for the Kabila regime in the DRC.

Peace talks between the Burundi government and the rebel groups, set up under the direction of former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere, began in June 1998. They collapsed in July this year after accusations by Nyerere that “some members have simply decided to block any kind of progress.” Further peace talks were then restarted on September 6 but have now collapsed again and may resume later this year. Both the government and the rebel factions are self-aggrandising cliques who care only about their immediate circle of patronage and regard the talks as an occasion for a new division of the spoils from their ravaged country.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact