

Burundi civil war escalates

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Intense fighting is taking place around the capital Bujumbura, between the Tutsi-dominated army and the ethnic Hutu rebels of the National Liberation Forces (FNL). At the end of February, the FNL launched their largest incursion into Burundi since the start of the eight-year civil war. The rebels were able to hold Kinama, a northern suburb of Bujumbura, for over three weeks and continue to engage the army on the outskirts of the capital. Over 200 Kinama residents were killed in the offensive and thousands have been forced to flee.

Fighting has also erupted in the central Gitega and Mwaro provinces between the other major Hutu rebel group, the Forces for the Defence of Democracy (FDD). An estimated 15,000 refugees have fled fighting in this region.

An April 13 report from the United Nations IRIN news network states that “informed sources” in Bujumbura warn of preparations for a “vast rebel offensive” against the capital. The report suggested that the fighting in Gitega was designed to open up a route to the west, allowing the influx of a further 10,000 rebels from the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in addition to the 8,000 already in the country. As well as the FDD, the rebels included the Interhamwe, the Rwandan Hutu militia, many of whom carried out the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and have since been operating in the DRC.

Other rebels were linking up with the FNL to the north of the capital. The IRIN report described the rebels as well armed. Another report of April 12 described a “massive FDD infiltration from Tanzania into Burundi’s eastern Ruyigi province.” Tanzania contains thousands of Hutu refugees and the Tanzanian government, hostile to the regime of President Buyoya in Burundi, turns a blind eye to rebel recruitment in the camps.

The Burundian civil war began in 1993, after the first

Hutu president since independence, Melchior Ndadaye, was assassinated. Unlike neighbouring Rwanda, where Hutus seized power after independence, Burundi has been ruled by a Tutsi regime for all but four months since gaining independence from Belgium in 1962—even though the Tutsis are a minority. As in neighbouring Rwanda, the ethnic divisions in this small country were fostered under colonial rule, with Tutsis given all the privileged positions. Since 1993, over 200,000 civilians have lost their lives, caught up in the fighting as the rebels launched their assaults from the countryside. The mainly Hutu population also suffers reprisals from Buyoya’s army, which holds them responsible for harbouring rebels. Hundreds of thousands have been made refugees, with many herded into government camps where they face starvation conditions as aid workers are unable to reach them.

Whilst there has been ethnic conflict in Burundi over the years in which thousands have died, it has not yet reached the same as in Rwanda. As the war escalates, however, so does the potential for an ethnically based bloodbath.

Since 1998, attempts at a peace settlement have continued in Arusha, Tanzania, under the auspices of the ex-President of South Africa Nelson Mandela. An accord was reached last August under considerable pressure from the West. In the presence of the then US President Clinton, seven Hutu parties and ten Tutsi parties, as well as the government, agreed to form an interim regime as a precursor to democratic elections. But the Arusha accord had no real substance. Both the FDD and the FNL refused to take part, and as *Africa Confidential* commented: “None of the key issues—such as the new constitution, structure of power sharing or reform of the military and security services—were agreed by all or even a majority of Burundi’s quarrelling military and political factions”.

The escalation of the war in Burundi is a direct result

of the recent Western-backed initiative to secure an agreement in the Congo war. Both the Burundi rebels and the Rwandan Interahamwe, numbering tens of thousands, form a major part of the DRC's army. Far better motivated than many of the Congo troops, they have regrouped and retrained— inextricably linking the Congo war with the conflict in its tiny neighbour Burundi. It is likely that they have received support from backers in France and Belgium, who have never accepted the present pro-US regime in Rwanda.

After the assassination of DRC President Laurent Kabil in January, and the installation of his son Joseph, the major Western powers have pressed for a renewal of the United Nations 1999 Lusaka peace agreement to bring the Congo war to an end. Joseph Kabil has toured Western capitals expressing his willingness to collaborate with the US-backed initiative, and held discussions with mining corporations over access to the huge mineral wealth of the country.

In recent weeks the countries involved in the war—Angola and Zimbabwe backing the DRC regime, and Rwanda and Uganda backing the rebel forces—have agreed to withdraw from frontline positions. The UN is sending eight envoys (led by the French ambassador and including the US and British ambassadors) to the DRC and other countries involved in the conflict next month to assess how the ceasefire is holding. Up to 500 military observers and 2,500 troops are being sent by the UN to observe the withdrawals.

A key part of the agreement being brokered in the Congo is how to deal with the Hutu militias. Under the Lusaka accord they are classed as “negative forces” that are to be disarmed, taking no part in the peace negotiations and playing no role in the proposed political dialogue about how the Congo is to be ruled. Yet in Burundi they have been regarded as an integral part of the peace negotiations, despite their refusal to attend the Arusha talks. Last week, South African Deputy President Jacob Zuma, who has replaced Mandela in the negotiations, met in Kinshasa with Jean-Bosco Ndayikenguru, leader of the FDD. Neither would reveal the content of their discussions. It is also likely that the visit of President Mugabe of Zimbabwe to France and Belgium last month included a discussion on the role of the Interahamwe. Their headquarters are believed to be near Lubumbashi in the mineral-rich

southern Katanga region of the Congo, where they have received support and training from the Zimbabwean regime.

President Buyoya clearly fears a large-scale movement of the Hutu forces into Burundi. Despite criticisms from Tutsi parties, he has been attempting to forge an agreement with the FDD, separate from the Arusha process. In a recent speech he pointed out that whatever the Lusaka accord stated about holding “negative forces” responsible for war crimes, “We are conscious of the fact that neither the Zimbabweans nor the Congolese are going to disarm their allies of yesterday in the former Zairian civil war, and we should thus defeat our own rebellion militarily or ensure that we reach a negotiated peaceful settlement through national dialogue.”



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