

African Union initiative offers little prospect of end to Burundi civil war

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The peace agreement signed at Arusha, Tanzania, last Monday appears to offer no solution to the civil war that has continued in this small country since 1993 and has resulted in over 200,000 deaths.

Nelson Mandela, who has led the negotiations since the death of Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, announced that a “breakthrough” had been reached at the Organisation of African Unity meeting (now called the African Union) earlier this month. But the main rebel forces opposing the Burundi regime, the Forces for the Defence of Democracy (FDD) and the Forces for National Liberation (FNL), were not represented at the talks, and fighting continues to intensify.

All that the peace agreement achieved was an undertaking that there would be a three year transition period for the first 18 months of which the present President Pierre Buyoya, a Tutsi, will remain in office, with a Hutu leader, Domitien Ndayizeye as his deputy. Buyoya agreed to a number of conditions, including the deployment of a peacekeeping force and the promise to reform the Tutsi-dominated army by integrating Hutus into it as soon as possible. The agreement did not say who would be the president in the second period, but it is understood it would be a Hutu. All politics in the country are based on allegiance to one of the main ethnic groups, Tutsi and Hutu. Tutsis, although in a minority, were appointed to the administrative positions under Belgian colonial rule and ethnic divisions were cultivated, as in neighbouring Rwanda.

As the peace negotiations were taking place there was a coup attempt in Bujumbura, Burundi’s capital. It was organised by hard-line Tutsis in the army opposed to Buyoya. They consider him to be too conciliatory, having agreed to negotiate with the Hutu opposition. Although the officers involved eventually surrendered, reports stated that they had passed through army

checkpoints without being challenged—reflecting their widespread support in the army. There was a similar attempt at a coup in April and the intention of the latest attempt was to release the imprisoned leaders of the earlier coup. Buyoya himself seized power in a coup in 1996 that was intended to stop a Hutu dominated elected government from running the country. Especially following the genocide carried out by the Hutu regime in Rwanda in 1994, the Tutsi regime has relied on the army to cling on to power, fearing a similar ethnic bloodletting.

Buyoya’s regime agreed to the latest peace proposals under considerable pressure. As well as Mandela, the talks were attended by South African Deputy President Jacob Zuma, the presidents of Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, and leading politicians from Zambia, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Buyoya was warned that sanctions would be applied to his government if he didn’t accept. In a situation where the economy of the landlocked country is near collapse, there are food shortages due to the war and a drought, malaria is rife and hundreds of thousands of people are displaced, he could hardly refuse. Such was the political pressure that all but one of the several of the Tutsi political parties opposed to Buyoya that had refused to take part in the talks (there are ten Tutsi parties and seven Hutu parties) changed their position and attended at the last minute.

The intensification of the civil war in Burundi is a by-product of the attempted peace settlement in the neighboring DRC. After the installation of Joseph Kabilo as president of the DRC in January, following the assassination of his father, the Western powers have attempted to get the outside countries involved in the Congo war to withdraw—Rwanda and Uganda that back the rebel forces, and Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe

who are backing the DRC government. Although all have agreed to a ceasefire and to pulling their forces back from the frontline, latest reports suggest that apart from Uganda none have withdrawn troops altogether. The rebel forces are also supposed to have agreed to the deal, but Jean-Pierre Bemba, leader of the Ugandan backed rebels, only accepted it after the United Nations mission to the Congo, led by French ambassador to the UN Jean-David Levitte, threatened him with sanctions and the seizure of overseas assets. Levitte declared the Congo river to be once again open to traffic.

In the eastern region of the Congo there is continued fighting between the Rwandan-backed rebels and the Hutu militia forces. The latter—made up of the former Rwandan army and the Interahamwe that carried out the 1994 genocide—were regarded as “negative forces” and are not included in the Congo peace initiative. Along with the Hutu rebels from Burundi, they formed a key part of the DRC army. No longer officially backed by the DRC, they are either attempting to move back into Rwanda, or in the case of the Burundian rebels, thousands are now moving to overthrow the Buyoya regime. There are also about half a million Hutu refugees from Burundi living in camps in Tanzania, and the rebels are said to recruit and have bases there also.

The pressure for a settlement in Burundi came from the Western powers, who are anxious to restore access to the Congo’s vast mineral resources. Although fighting still continues a Canadian corporation, Tenke Mining, is negotiating with the DRC government for concessions on high grade copper-cobalt deposits in the southern Katanga region. Several reports have indicated the importance of the metal tantalum to western electronic corporations, because it is used in the production of mobile phones. The biggest deposits of the metal ore in the world are to be found in the eastern Congo. It sells at \$375 a kilogram. At present it is mined by the Rwandan-backed rebels to finance their operations.

As soon as the peace agreement was signed in Arusha, the Belgian presidency of the European Union expressed its “satisfaction”. Belgium and the EU are said to have promised aid for the Buyoya regime. Belgium is also providing logistical support for peacekeeping troops that have been agreed by South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal.

Negotiations are continuing over Burundi in South Africa. Leader of the FDD rebels, Jean Bosco Ndayikengurukiye, is to attend talks there this week, as is President Buyoya. It is believed that DRC President Joseph Kabila and Gabon President Omar Bongo will also attend. Parallel talks to those led by Mandela have been continuing in Libreville, Gabon, between the FDD and the Burundi regime. Although under pressure from the DRC and neighboring countries to call off their mounting offensive on Burundi, it is difficult to see that the FDD or the other rebel group the FNL—expected to take part in South African talks later—will see any advantage in making an agreement with the present regime.



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