

New government established in Burundi

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After two years of talks, a transitional administration was established in Burundi at the beginning of this month. Despite the deal being described by its main facilitator Nelson Mandela as a “breakthrough which will bring permanent peace and stability”, however, it appears only to have exacerbated the country’s civil war.

Drawn from 17 political parties of both the Tutsi and Hutu tribal groupings, the power-sharing administration is backed by a 700 strong “protection” force of South African troops. Within the government, all political parties are designated as either Tutsi or Hutu according to their ethnicity. Fourteen of the cabinet posts are to be held by Hutus and 12 by Tutsis including defence and finance.

The country is still effectively run by President Pierre Buyoya, and the Tutsi-dominated army. In establishing a new government, the aim is to hold out the possibility to Hutu leaders that they will eventually be able to play a more equal role in the running of the regime. Buyoya is supposed to stand down after 18 months and be replaced by vice-president Domitien Ndayizeye, a leader of the main Hutu party Front for Democracy in Burundi (FRODEBU). Elections would then be held within three years.

After the formation of the new administration, Hutu rebels from the Forces for the Defence of Democracy (FDD) and the smaller National Liberation Forces (FNL) have stepped up their war against the government. The civil war, which has resulted in over 300,000 deaths, has continued since Tutsi soldiers murdered the Hutu President Melchior Ndadaye eight years ago. Although Hutus make up about 85 percent of the population, Ndadaye was the first elected president after 30 years of one-party rule by the Tutsi elite. Buyoya seized power in a military coup in 1996.

Both the FDD and FNL refused to take part in the peace accords held in Tanzania in August 2000. They

demand the dismantling of “concentration” camps (the camps into which the government has herded thousands of mainly Hutu civilians supposedly for their own protection), the release of political prisoners and the reform of the army.

The larger FDD has responded to the deal by carrying out attacks on civilians. They have also clashed with the army in a number of areas throughout the eastern part of Burundi, outside their usual region of operation in the southeast. According to AFP reports, about 130 civilians, 200 rebels and 50 government soldiers have been killed. More than 2,000 people fleeing attacks were forced to seek refuge in the northeastern province of Muyinga.

The FDD hit international headlines by taking schoolboys hostage, firstly a dozen primary school children and then 250 to 300 teenagers from a boarding school. Most of the children escaped, although it is reported that some of the older ones were forcibly recruited into the rebel militia.

Mandela is hoping to coax the Hutu politicians, and through them their contacts in the FDD and FNL, by holding out the promise of Western aid. After Mandela’s telephone talks with French President Chirac, the European Commission were prompted into making a 65 million euro (\$ 58 million) aid deal with Burundi, which is supposed to be targeted on infrastructure projects and “poverty reduction.” Western donors promised aid worth \$440 million last year, though little of it appears to have materialised. Most aid was withdrawn in the 1990s, and Burundi’s economy, especially coffee production, has virtually collapsed as a result of the civil war.

South Africa also appears to be carrying out discussions with the FDD and FNL directly, even though the FDD are said to be opposed to the South African mediators, preferring a French-based initiative through President Omar Bongo of Gabon. Both rebel

groups are said to make regular visits to South Africa to hold talks with Mandela's team and with "conflict resolution expert" Jan Van Eck, a former African National Congress (ANC) parliamentarian now based at the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

The involvement of the 700 South African troops signals a change of direction by the ANC government. Since the ANC came to power in 1994, the powerful South African army has been little used outside of the country. In 1998 a force was sent to quell opposition in Lesotho, but this tiny state is virtually a South African protectorate. Last year, South African troops carried out rescue missions in the Mozambique floods.

The *Financial Times* claims that the heavily armed South African force were protecting just four Hutu returnees and *Independent Online* reported that Jean Minani, a key FRODEBU leader, had not used the South African troops for his protection. The troops are supposed to be demonstrating to the Burundian elite how to build its own 1,000 strong military "protection force", made up evenly of Hutus and Tutsis, using the South African experience of integrating black and white troops.

Extremist Tutsi politicians opposed to the peace process have protested against the "decision to send occupying forces to Burundi", saying that they had been sent to "protect people who committed genocide". Some even called for attacks to be carried out on the South Africans.

Nevertheless, it is significant that South Africa quickly took up the protection force initiative, with Mandela using his authority to get parliamentary approval. The United Nations would not endorse the South African intervention because of the absence of a ceasefire agreement, although it has "welcomed" the establishment of the transitional government. In addition to the South Africans, there are supposed to be further contingents of troops from Nigeria, Senegal and Ghana but they have yet to appear as these countries have expressed concern at the absence of a ceasefire.

Whilst it is classed as a peacekeeping mission, this incursion into Central Africa can only be viewed as a development of imperialist interests in the region, particularly as Burundi's on-going civil war is a key factor in the continuation of fighting in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The peace process in the DRC now appears to be

stalling, despite the willingness of President Joseph Kabila—installed after the assassination of his father—to open up the country's extensive mineral resources to Western corporations. South Africa's military intervention will put more pressure on the regimes and militias involved in the Congo war—including the rebel Burundi forces—a calculation that was no doubt discussed at the talks between Mandela and US President Bush held mid-November.



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