

Burundi's Ntaryamira strove for ethnic harmony.

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BUJUMBURA, April 7 (Reuter) - Cyrien Ntaryamira, the urbane Burundi president slain in neighbouring Rwanda on Wednesday, was a moderate who fought in vain to end ethnic hatred tearing apart his country.

Ntaryamira and Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana were killed along with two Burundi ministers and five senior Rwandan officials when their plane crashed in the Rwandan capital of Kigali. Officials said the plane was hit by a rocket.

Ntaryamira, a 38-year-old agronomist, made a reluctant entry into politics last July when Burundi's first democratically elected, president Melchior Ndadaye, promoted him to agriculture minister from a career civil service job as agriculture planner.

A political moderate who abhorred tribal animosities between the majority Hutu tribe and the minority Tutsi in this central African state, Ntaryamira had promoted Tutsis to top positions as a sign of reconciliation when he headed the agriculture ministry.

Renegade soldiers from the Tutsi-dominated army murdered Ndadaye on October 21 in a failed coup, triggering ethnic slaughter across the country which killed up to 50,000 people.

Ntaryamira was a compromise between the former ruling UPRONA (Party for Unity and Progress) and the slain Ndadaye's Front for Democracy in Burundi (FRODEBU).

Even political opponents credited him with having strong grassroots support across the tribal divide especially in rural areas.

"He had a clean record, genuinely committed to peace and reconciliation, a man greatly pained when slow progress was made in ending the killings," a Western diplomat in Bujumbura said.

"A calm, soft-spoken man, intelligent and brilliant. He was extremely popular with many of the ordinary civilians."

As a young man, pains of tribal strife left an indelible mark on Ntaryamira, a Hutu. He fled his native Rwanda after massacres in 1972 that killed an estimated 100,000 people.

Ntaryamira studied in Rwandan schools and the national university in Kigali where he graduated with honours in agronomy.

He worked briefly in his adopted home but left in the mid-1980s to return home after former military ruler Jean Pierre Buyoya appealed for educated

Burundians to rebuild the country.

Ntaryamira was married with three young children.

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