

Fears rise of new killing in Burundi, Rwanda.

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BUJUMBURA, April 7 (Reuter) - The killing of the presidents of Burundi and Rwanda threatens to unleash a new tide of tribal slaughter in the two tiny neighbours, bedevilled for decades by ethnic savagery.

Diplomats said the deaths of Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira and Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana came at the worst possible time as both states were making renewed efforts with international help to put a stop to the killings.

"It is a terrible, terrible catastrophe for both countries at this very dangerous time," said a Western diplomat in the Bujumbura, which was hit by violence last month. "Anything could happen."

The deep rivalries between the Hutu majority in both tiny central African states and the Tutsi minority have given both countries bloody histories since before independence in 1962.

Bujumbura was quiet immediately following the deaths of the two presidents on the Rwandan presidential jet which Rwandan officials said was hit by a rocket as it approached Kigali airport.

"Everyone is hiding indoors and listening to their radios," said a Hutu resident, whose mother and father were injured in a grenade attack last month. "We fear for our lives and country."

The plane was returning both Hutu leaders from a peace summit in Tanzania designed to build popular support in the fragile Ntaryamira government and break political deadlock in Rwanda blocking implementation of a pact to end civil war.

Tanzanian President Hassan Ali Mwinyi warned the grim-faced presidents at the conference in Dar Es Salaam on Wednesday that without peace their countries were doomed to annihilation.

A week of clashes and massacres in northeastern suburbs of Bujumbura between the Tutsi-dominated army and mostly Hutu gunmen late last month killed hundreds of people and drove tens of thousands from their homes.

Up to 50,000 Tutsis and Hutus have been slaughtered across Burundi since renegade troops killed its first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, on October 21 last year in a failed coup.

The Hutu, a Bantu people, account for an estimated 85 per cent of the estimated 5.6 million population. The Tutsi, feudal overlords before colonial days, make up less than 15 per cent.

Neither has a defined territory and they speak the same language, but discrimination in favour of the Tutsi assured them control of the government and army for most of the three decades since independence.

Tribal hatred has exploded repeatedly since Burundi became independence from Belgium, with an estimated 100,000 people, mainly Hutu, killed in massacres in 1972. In August 1988 Hutu farmers along the border with Rwanda staged an uprising. Some 5,000 people died before the army could restore calm.

Nearly a million Rwandese had been driven from their homes by civil war since 1990 pitting the government against Tutsi-dominated Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels who invaded from Uganda.

At least half a million are in danger of starvation because of drought in southern Rwanda and political paralysis since December, holding up implementation of accords to end the war signed in the northern Tanzanian town of Arusha last August.

The U.N. envoy to Rwanda, Jacques-Roger Booh Booh, warned this month the tiny country faced collapse and a new civil war.

Unidentified gunmen shot dead Public Works and Energy Minister Felicien Gatabazi in February in Kigali as he returned from a cabinet meeting trying to break the political impasse.

Gatabazi was a Hutu but had close links with the RPF.

Tribal warfare in Rwanda in 1959 and 1963 killed more than 20,000 people and sent tens of thousands of Tutsis into exile.

An estimated one million Rwandan civilians were driven from their homes during the civil war and thousands perished.

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