

Rwanda lurches back into civil war, premier slain.

Reuters, April 7, 1994

KIGALI, April 7 (Reuter) - Rwanda lurched back into civil war on Thursday with its prime minister killed in an orgy of bloodletting following the slaying of its president and that of neighbouring Burundi.

Members of the security forces and gangs of youths wielding machetes, knives and clubs stalked the capital Kigali, settling tribal scores by hacking and clubbing people to death or simply shooting them, diplomats and witnesses said.

Rebels of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), camped in the capital's hilltop parliament compound under an August civil war peace accord, joined the fray, firing mortars and rifles.

"The situation is dramatic," said a U.N. official watching the rebels. "The RPF are engaging in direct fighting with government forces. The peace accord is dead."

Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana, 57, and Burundi President Cyprien Ntaryamira, 38, killed on Wednesday when rockets downed their plane in Kigali, were Hutu, the majority tribe in both countries long at odds with the Tutsi minority.

Ntaryamira's predecessor was murdered by Tutsi in October.

A U.N. spokesman in Kigali said Rwandan Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana was killed on Thursday near the presidential palace but U.N. forces had been denied access.

"We are still trying to find out how it happened," he said.

Uwilingiyimana, a Hutu, was appointed in July last year and was one of Africa's first women prime ministers.

Asked in a telephone interview with Belgian RTL-Television earlier if she feared for her life, she replied : "I fear for the security of everyone. The international community must act."

In a separate interview with Radio France Internationale, as fighting spread across Kigali, she said :

"There is shooting, people are being terrorised, people are inside their homes lying on the floor. We are suffering the consequences of the death of the head of state."

U.N. officials in New York said U.N. peacekeepers guarding her had been disarmed and she had been taken by armed men from a U.N. aid compound where she had sought refuge.

Hatred between Hutu and Tutsi, former feudal overlords, predate Rwandan and Burundi independence from Belgium in 1962.

Tens of thousands of Tutsi and Hutu have died in ethnic slaughter in both countries over the years. The death toll in Burundi since renegade troops killed its first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, on October 21 was estimated at up to 50,000.

The remnants of Burundi's government appealed for calm after the killing of the two presidents as they returned to Kigali from a Tanzania peace summit. Diplomats in Burundi said that country remained largely peaceful.

In Rwanda, relief workers said an accurate death toll was impossible as they were unable to venture out with shooting and mortar and grenade explosions rocking much of the hilly city.

Belgian Foreign Minister Willy Claes, visiting Romania, said a section of the 5,000-man army tried to seize power but most soldiers had not joined the revolt. He called for the U.N. mandate to be strengthened so peacekeepers could restore order.

Rwanda, famed for its rare mountain gorillas, called itself the "Switzerland of Africa" before a 1990 rebel invasion from Uganda.

RPF members, from a force of 600 who entered Kigali as bodyguards under a stalled peace pact to bring the rebels into a new government and end civil war, joined the latest fighting. They had been holed up near the parliament since December.

Diplomats said the rebels lost patience after killings by security forces and armed gangs of youths.

"They are using shells, mortars and machineguns. I've just seen two RPF men walk by on foot. They seem quite confident in what they are doing and they are also shooting with guns and mortars from the CND parliament building itself," one said.

The U.N. spokesman said members of the presidential guard abducted three government ministers and their families from their homes and three U.N. military observers guarding them.

"We are asking for the immediate and unconditional release of the three observers," the spokesman, Mukhtar Gueye, added. He had no firm word on the fate of the abducted ministers.

"I have a total of three observers missing from the abduction and 13 troops missing after they were held when they tried to reach the site of the plane crash," he told Reuters.

He could not confirm a U.N. report from New York that three Belgian U.N. military observers had been killed.

He identified the abducted ministers as Information Minister Faustin Rucozoza, Labour and Social Affairs Minister Landuard Ndasigwa and Agriculture Minister Frederic Nzamurambaho.

The shooting erupted in Kigali on Thursday despite repeated appeals on state radio for calm and people to stay at home.

The Belgian news agency Belga said at least 17 Rwandan priests had been killed by troops.

U.N. troops patrolled with security forces in some parts of Kigali. Fellow peacekeepers in the 2,500-strong force elsewhere were forced to withdraw after marauding troops threatened to shoot them.

The identity of the killers of Habyarimana and Ntaryamira remained a mystery but the RPF denied any involvement.

A government statement said two Burundi ministers, five senior Rwandan officials including the army chief of staff and the French crew of the presidential jet also died on the plane.

(c) Reuters Limited 1994