

Rwandan president ruled supreme almost to end.

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KIGALI, April 7 (Reuter) - Rwanda's President Juvenal Habyarimana, killed in a rocket attack on Wednesday, was struggling to stop power slipping from his hands as his country slid back towards civil war and famine.

Habyarimana, 57, and Burundi President Cyprien Ntaryamira, 38, both died when the rocket destroyed the plane they were travelling in as it approached the airport in the Rwandan capital Kigali. They were returning from regional peace talks in the Tanzanian capital Dar es Salaam.

Rwanda's supreme ruler for 17 years until a rebel invasion in 1990, Habyarimana held on to power steadfastly despite accepting a peace pact last year that reduced his influence.

The former major-general spent much of this year trying to assuage Western anger and appeared on the brink of installing a new transitional government despite a political stalemate since December.

In the face of strong U.N. warnings of renewed civil war, famine and economic chaos and accusations by opponents that he was behind delays in implementing peace accords, Habyarimana maintained Rwanda was on the verge of a breakthrough to peace.

He pledged to heal tribal rifts between his majority Hutus and the minority Tutsis and to end three years of civil war.

But Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels, camped around the hilltop parliament in the centre of Kigali since December, held him responsible for what they said was a campaign of evasion.

The RPF invaded Rwanda from neighbouring Uganda in October 1990, adding to a series of economic problems including famine and a foreign exchange squeeze.

Accusing Habyarimana of being corrupt and undemocratic, the RPF posed a severe military test for one of the world's poorest countries which had dedicated government spending to modest development programmes.

Habyarimana, a Hutu, took power in a bloodless coup in 1973 that ousted Gregoire Kayibanda, Rwanda's first president, also a Hutu, who had been in office since independence from Belgium in 1962.

He was confirmed as president in single-candidate elections in 1978, 1983 and 1988, when he won a final five-year term with 99 per cent of the vote.

Tutsi land and cattle owners once lorded it over the peasant farming Hutus as the aristocrats of the region. In 1959, three years before independence from

Belgium, the Hutus overthrew Tutsi dominance in a bloody rebellion that sent tens of thousands of Tutsis fleeing to neighbouring countries, especially Uganda.

Habyarimana promised during his years in power to give fair representation among the tribes – about 85 per cent Hutu, 14 per cent Tutsis and one per cent Twa – but some Tutsis felt this meant they were totally excluded from power.

Critics also said Habyarimana had favoured Hutus from the north, his own region, at the expense of those from the south.

A small, neat man, he ruled until 1990 with a firm hand and his political party, the Revolutionary Movement for National Development (MRND), penetrated throughout society.

But he bent with the changes sweeping Africa and responded to calls for pluralism by installing an opposition-dominated transitional government in April 1992 to pave the way for a multi-party democracy.

He entrusted the task of holding peace talks with the RPF to the transitional government and under the Arusha peace accords signed last year his MRND would take five of 22 positions in the new government.

The new cabinet including the RPF should have taken power in December before pluralist polls in 1995. Habyarimana was sworn in as president for the 22-month transitional period in January.

Criticism within the country, especially about corruption, was often directed more towards Habyarimana's entourage than towards the president himself, who diplomats said lived modestly.

They said Habyarimana's low-key style and concentration on economic management initially won him much popular support.

But disaffection grew as Rwanda slid into economic crisis, due partly to a collapse in the price of coffee, the country's main export, and food shortages caused by overpopulation.

Habyarimana, who survived a coup attempt in 1980, was born on March 8, 1937, at Gasiza in the northwest of Rwanda, and educated at St Paul College, Bukavu, in Zaire, where he studied humanities.

After a year at the Lovanium Faculty of Medicine, Kinshasa, he turned to soldiering in 1960 before independence in 1962.

Habyarimana studied at the Louvain Cadet School in Belgium and Kigali Officers School. He became chief of staff of the National Guard in 1963 and played a major role in the defeat of insurgent Tutsi forces in that year.

Two years later he was appointed Minister of the National Guard and Police and was promoted to major-general in April 1973.

Habyarimana married Agatha Kangika in 1963. They had seven children.

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