

UPSURGE OF VIOLENCE FEARED IN BURUNDI - diplomats

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BUJUMBURA, April 24 (Reuter) - Diplomats and aid workers said on Sunday they feared a sudden upsurge of violence in Rwanda's neighbour Burundi where insecurity is worsening daily.

They said a government deadline for people to hand in all illegal weapons before 6 p.m. (1600 GMT) on Sunday was expected to be widely ignored.

Passage of the deadline might spark fresh violence between the Tutsi-dominated military and gunmen from the Hutu majority - the same tribes who have plunged Rwanda into bloody turmoil.

"I doubt all hell will break loose all over Burundi but it might be confined to specific parts of town," a diplomat said.

"The problem is that the armed forces have been trying to disarm everyone for a long time now but haven't been able to do it. So there is a chance it will get bloodier when the deadline passes," he added.

Diplomats have warned Hutu-Tutsi violence in Rwanda might spill over into neighbouring Burundi. Both states have suffered from periodic outbreaks of tribal slaughter since independence in 1962.

The estimated 100,000 killed in Rwanda over the past two and a half weeks is the bloodiest mass slaughter in Africa since massacres that killed 100,000 in Burundi in 1972.

The killing in Rwanda began after President Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundi's President Cyprien Ntaryamira were killed when a rocket downed their plane at Kigali airport on April 6.

The diplomats and aid workers said troops had been besieging three northeastern suburbs of Bujumbura since Wednesday and civilians in the interior had been erecting barricades to stop armoured vehicles being brought to the capital by the military.

"These barricades could be a sign the conflict in Bujumbura is about to spread out of the capital," an aid worker said.

The government announced the deadline on Saturday after new President Sylvestre Ntibantunganya held talks with security officials on how to end sporadic but almost nightly gunfire in the suburbs.

Burundi radio quoted a statement by government spokesman Issa Ngendakimana as saying that if the security situation continued to deteriorate the country

would shortly collapse.

The government condemned armed groups it said were causing insecurity and appealed to soldiers to observe discipline and only resort to using their weapons to defend themselves from attack.

“It (the government) reminds the population that any illegal carrying of weapons is forbidden and anyone who goes astray will be seriously punished,” the radio quoted the statement as saying.

The government also called for roads which had been blocked to be opened and urged people to respect steps to restore peace.

A number of people were reported killed last week in shooting on Rwanda’s border with Burundi when thousands of Rwandans tried to force their way across the frontier.

The shooting at night has been concentrated in Bujumbura’s northeastern suburb of Kamenge, the focus of a week of tribally-based fighting last month in which hundreds of people were killed.

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