

Army coup fails in Burundi

Muvira, Deogratius

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BUJUMBURA, April 25 (Reuter) - A coup by paratroopers failed in the central African state of Burundi on Monday when other soldiers refused to take part for fear of triggering a tribal bloodbath like the massacres in neighbouring Rwanda.

The Burundian capital of Bujumbura slowly returned to normal after the early morning coup bid failed, although sporadic shooting broke out in the northeastern suburb of Kamenge, witnesses said.

"There is the fairly usual level of shooting in Kamenge and people still aren't free to move in or out because the army is besieging it," said a diplomat. "But the rest of the city is quiet."

Kamenge is a slum inhabited by the majority Hutu tribe and a centre of opposition to the Tutsi-dominated army.

Burundi army chief of staff Colonel Jean Bikomagu told Reuters that coup organisers and supporters had been arrested and were being questioned by the military high command.

"A group of soldiers from a barracks in Bujumbura planned a putsch but they were stopped by loyalists when they left their post to execute their plans overnight," Bikomagu said.

"Several soldiers have been arrested and the military command is interrogating them to find out why they wanted a military takeover."

Diplomats said they believed at least six paratroop officers were arrested after the coup attempt, which took place during a weekend of widespread rumours about a takeover bid.

They denied a Belgian radio report that members of Burundi's government had gone into hiding, probably in a Western embassy.

"I have spoken to two or three members of the government and they are not hiding. In fact they seem more concerned about how to end the Kamenge shooting than the coup attempt," a diplomat said.

Bikomagu said the capital was calm. The post office stayed shut on Monday but schools and markets opened as usual and most offices and shops lifted their shutters a few hours later.

Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira was killed with his Rwandan counterpart Juvenal Habyarimana on April 6 when a rocket downed their plane at the airport in the Rwandan capital Kigali.

The Tutsi – a minority in both Burundi and Rwanda – were the main victims of tribal slaughter this month in Rwanda, where politics and the armed forces have long been dominated by the Hutu.

In Burundi, however, tens of thousands of Hutu died after Tutsi soldiers overthrew Melchior Ndadaye, the country's first Hutu president, in a failed coup by renegade troops.

Aid agencies say as many as 100,000 people may have been killed and two million displaced in Rwanda so far this month.

But Burundi, which quickly named Hutu Sylvestre Ntibantuganya as interim president, stayed relatively calm.

Journalists in Bujumbura said the coup failed mainly because moderate soldiers feared the chaotic example of their northern neighbour, where government forces and rebels of the Rwanda Patriotic Front are battling for control of the capital Kigali.

“The moderates won this time. They feared another wave of killings so soon after what happened after the death of...Ndadaye last October. They wanted no role in new anarchy,” one said.

Belgium, the former colonial ruler of Burundi and Rwanda, advised nationals living in Burundi to stay at home after the failed military coup. Belgians in Bujumbura said the advice was largely ignored.

A U.S. embassy official said it had advised Americans in Bujumbura to stay indoors on Monday but because of an expected government clampdown on illegal weapons rather than the coup.

Diplomats and aid workers said on Sunday they feared an upsurge of violence after a government deadline for people to surrender illegal weapons before 6 p.m. (1600 GMT).

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