

Coup fails in Burundi

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

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."

Bikomagu said the capital was calm, but aid workers reported sporadic shooting in slum areas inhabited by the majority Hutu tribe, whose recent attempts to win a political voice have enraged the Tutsi-dominated army.

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 warlike 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, it was tens of thousands of Hutu who died after Tutsi soldiers overthrew Melchior Ndadaye, the country's first Hutu president, in a coup last October. Ndadaye was voted into office a few months earlier in polls monitored by Western observers.

Aid agencies and the U.N. say as many as 100,000 people may have been killed and two million displaced in this month's Rwandan bloodbath.

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

Government offices in Bujumbura remained shut on Monday morning. Residents stayed indoors.

"No one is going to work. Government offices are closed and tribal tension is at its height," one resident said.

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 now battling for control of Kigali.

“The moderates won this time. They feared another wave of killings so soon after what happened after the death of President Melchior Ndadaye last October. They wanted no role in new anarchy,” a Western journalist told Reuters.

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