

Burundi tense as opposition tries to settle on new PM

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BUJUMBURA, Feb 18 (AFP) - Burundi's opposition made a fresh attempt Saturday to find a candidate to succeed the prime minister they accuse of betrayal, after a UN mission warned that growing unrest in this ethnically-divided country is ready to explode.

But the opposition, led by the Union for National Progress (UPRONA), has so far failed to impose its choice on the smaller parties in the country's increasingly brittle coalition government, against the background of a four-day old general strike taking hold throughout the central African nation.

"I want a solution no later than today," UPRONA president Charles Mukasi told AFP Saturday.

However, in an increasingly tense atmosphere, diplomats doubt the opposition can overcome its divisions.

The army, dominated by the Tutsis but so far neutral in Burundi's

latest crisis, began Saturday to show signs of growing impatience with what a senior officer called the country's "political weakness".

Defence Minister Firmin Sinzoyiheba deplored on Burundi radio that the army might be forced to intervene in the crisis which he said should be "settled by the politicians."

His troops, he said, were already engaged in skirmishes with "armed groups" of Hutu extremists in several parts of the country.

A number of people have been killed in clashes in Bujumbura between the Tutsi minority and the Hutu majority since the strike was called by the opposition last Tuesday.

The Tutsi-dominated opposition is demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Anatole Kanyenkiko, the UPRONA leader who is accused of betraying his own followers.

Kanyenkiko blasted his former political allies, saying they were pre-

pared to risk driving the country to tragedy to bring about his departure, in a speech late Friday.

"A handful of politicians refuse to take lessons from the Rwandan drama and want to drive our country to a similar tragedy," he said during the closing ceremony of an international aid conference for Rwandan and Burundian refugees. Burundi has a similar ethnic makeup as its neighbour.

His often emotional speech was greeted with sustained applause. The conference, organised by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), was held in a tense, high-security atmosphere in a troop-ringed Bujumbura hotel.

Kanyenkiko said Wednesday he was ready to resign as soon as the opposition agreed on a successor, but he pulled back from immediate resignation to avoid creating a political vacuum. The opposition accuse him of playing for time.

The three-day international conference adopted an action plan to encourage the return of some 3.8 million refugees – both displaced Burundians and people from neighboring Rwanda who fled their country's bloodbath last year.

A UN mission warned on its return to New York Friday that conditions that the situation in Burundi

was potentially explosive.

The last major outbreak of violence in Burundi was triggered by an October 1993 coup attempt, which triggered massacres that left some 50,000 dead.

"The political and security situation remains precarious and is potentially explosive," a report by the mission, which left the country Friday, said.

"There are systematic and persistent efforts by extremist forces, notably among the ranks of the UPRONA, to undermine the coalition government," the report said, referring the principal opposition party.

With the weekend providing a brief respite in the strike-bound country, the supreme executive arm of government, the National Security Council, called on the army to ensure the safety of those who want to return to work next week.

"We are ready to do all we can to protect those who want to go to work, but we cannot give an absolute guarantee. That would be illusory," the defence minister said. "It is up to the political leaders to lift the strike order," he said.

Sinzoyiheba reiterated the army's opposition to foreign intervention in Burundi. Burundi's problems had to be settled by Burundians themselves, he said.

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