

Two countries linked by ethnic bloodletting:
Rivalry between Hutu and Tutsi, who live in both
Rwanda and Burundi, is behind the incessant
violence, writes Robert Block

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RWANDA and Burundi straddle perhaps Africa's most gory ethnic faultline. Since independence from Belgium in 1962, their histories – inexorably intertwined – have been marked by ethnic hatred and tribal violence. Atrocities are so commonplace that a news magazine once remarked : 'Another week, another 300 massacred in Burundi.' The observation could have just as easily been made about neighbouring Rwanda.

At the centre of the bloodletting is the rivalry between the majority Hutu and the minority Tutsi peoples, who span both countries. Although numerically fewer, the Tutsi ruled the area as feudal warlords for centuries. Since independence, however, their dominance has been challenged in both countries, always in a brutal manner.

In Rwanda, the Hutu ended Tutsi rule in a rebellion in 1959. Tribal strife erupted again in December 1963 and again in late 1972. In 15 years of turmoil, tens of thousands of Tutsis fled to neighbouring countries. At least 100,000 people were killed.

In July 1973, Major-General Juve-

nal Habyarimana, a Hutu and then defence minister, overthrew Rwanda's long-serving president, Gregoire Kayibanda, also a Hutu. Habyarimana, a northerner from Gisenyi, then introduced regional Hutu rivalries into Rwanda's volatile political arena by fostering the predominance of northerners in the government. By 1985 regional rivalries largely displaced Hutu-Tutsi strife as the prime focus of political competition, although there was relative political stability.

But whatever calm there was was shattered in 1990, when 10,000 rebels of the Tutsi-dominated Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded Rwanda from neighbouring Uganda. The invaders at one point reached the capital, Kigali, before being repulsed by government troops. The invasion did prompt movement towards political reform by Habyarimana. A peace treaty was signed by Habyarimana and the RPF leader, Alex Kanyarengwe, in the north Tanzanian town of Arusha in August last year. But the RPF blamed Habyarimana for repeated delays in forming a new government and par-

liament to end the civil war.

A transitional government should have been formed in September, but politicians, squabbling and vying for power, have failed to agree on the distribution of ministerial positions among the parties.

Diplomats and aid workers say that Rwanda has been a tinderbox since late February, when gunmen shot dead a government minister and vengeful mobs dragged a leader of a hardline Hutu party from his car and chopped him to pieces with machetes.

The United Nations has sent a 2,000-man contingent of observers to Rwanda to oversee the formation of a transitional government but has warned that it might have to withdraw if no progress is made. It is against this background of ethnic and political turmoil that Habyarimana was killed.

The situation in Burundi was until yesterday even worse than in Rwanda.

After Burundi's first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, died during a failed coup on 21 October last year, a Tutsi-Hutu bloodbath began anew – and still continues. Tens of thousands of Hutu fled the country for Rwanda. The Akanyaru river which separates Rwanda and Burundi has been awash with bloated bodies. The death-toll since October is in excess of 50,000.

Ndadaye was elected president in July, but this was apparently not a time for reconciliation. Neither tribe had forgotten the massacres of Hutu in 1972 that left 100,000 dead, or the Hutu farmers' uprising in August 1988, in which 5,000 people were killed.

Cyprien Ntaryamira was chosen in January to succeed Ndadaye, but he was powerless during his short rule to stop the new wave of Hutu-Tutsi violence. It is doubtful that his successor, whenever he is chosen, will be able to do any better at stopping the killing.