

Africa's ethnic cleansing Voice of the massacres

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For 30 years the Hutu and Tutsi tribes of central Africa have fought - for the spoils of power, for revenge, and from fear. Hundreds of thousands have died or become refugees. Mark Huband weighs the prospects of democracy breaking the spiral of warfare

'We all want to live together, but it's impossible. Impossible. They just don't want it,' said Therese Minani, stretching out her muddy legs at the entrance to her twig and grass hillside hovel.

Therese, a Hutu, had been to Kigani refugee camp in southern Rwanda before. In 1972, when thousands of Hutus from Burundi fled tribal massacres perpetrated by Tutsis and the Tutsi-dominated army, she escaped with her family to this same smoke- and mist-draped valley. The Hutus responded by launching a rebellion which led, in May 1972, to Burundi's borders being shut to allow the killing to go on without outside witnesses. Observers later said that 150,000 people were slaughtered.

Therese Minani later returned to her home at Ntega in northern Burundi. In 1988 she fled back to Kigani. With memories of the 1972 massacres still fresh, Hutus dragged logs across

the roads to prevent soldiers stopping Hutu attacks on Tutsis. But in a week civilians and troops slaughtered more than 20,000 Hutus.

Burundi's first post-independence government was mixed between the two tribes until the massacres in 1972, by which time Tutsi power over the 5.4 million population was absolute and 240,000 Hutu refugees had become a permanent presence in neighbouring east African countries.

But by last October Burundi appeared to have made the radical political strides needed to break this pattern of fragile peace followed by massacres which has led to 400,000 Burundians fleeing across borders and left up to 250,000 dead.

The delicate tribal balance, in which Tutsis, who form 15 per cent of the population, hold sway over the Hutus, comprising 85 per cent, appeared to have been tipped to allow a more equitable sharing of power, after the return of a Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, in a landslide election victory last June.

'There's never been any ethnic conflict between the groups on the level of the village. There was no ethnic war before independence. It's the politicians who transfer their political

conflicts on to the hillsides. If the leaders say nothing then the killings don't happen,' said Major Pierre Buyoya, the Tutsi who ruled Burundi from 1987 until last year's elections, in a rare interview last week.

Maj Buyoya, who came to power in a bloodless coup, introduced reforms in 1991 banning discrimination along tribal lines. In March 1992 single-party rule was scrapped, and last June Mr Ndadaye, a former banker, defeated Maj Buyoya.

His election marked the end of Tutsi domination. The following month Tutsis mounted a failed coup. In October the president and four senior government officials were bayoneted to death in another, successful, one. Hutu revenge for Ndadaye's death was swift. But the Tutsi-dominated army sided with Tutsi civilians in the ensuing slaughter and 100,000 people were killed.

'The events in October in Burundi were created by ethnic extremists on both sides, who want exclusive power,' said Maj Buyoya, who keeps track of the situation from his modest villa on the edge of the capital Bujumbura. His own role in launching the democratic process, which led to his electoral defeat, has earned him the opprobrium of extremists within his own Tutsi tribe.

'But the thing which really led to the conflict was the violence in Rwanda - the massacre of the Tutsis. The Hutus chased them and exterminated them. The Hutu saw power there as their natural right, and this led to all the subsequent violence. Ever since, power has been ethnicised. It's exactly the same in Rwanda as in Burundi.' Before German colonialists arrived in Rwanda and Burundi in 1899, both were ruled by Tutsi absolute monarchs.

The Belgians, when the United Nations handed over the former German colonies to the first world war victors, continued the German practice of ruling through the monarchs rather than having their own administrations.

Tutsi domination of the ruling class allowed them to benefit in both countries from Belgian preferment, and become the first to be educated. But pressure for independence during the 1950s resulted in their histories diverging radically, and creating the current diaspora for the dispossessed in both.

While the two tribes mixed in Burundi until the 1972 massacres brought an end to Hutu aspirations, Hutus in Rwanda, encouraged by the Belgians, rose up against the Tutsi monarchists in 1959.

So callous were the Belgians in their efforts to isolate the Tutsis that the colonialists successfully spread the view that their system of forced labour on the plantations was actually a Tutsi initiative. Such inflammatory Belgian statements encouraged Burundi's Hutu majority in their uprising, and the inevitable independence saw them seize power from the Tutsi chieftans.

By 1961 the Hutus had brought in ethnic cleansing which forced up to 260,000 Tutsis to flee to Burundi and 300,000 to Uganda. In this way the majority Hutus in Rwanda came to power after years of repression, blaming the Tutsis rather than the appalling Belgian colonialists for their pre-independence plight.

THIRTY years of such turmoil and thousands of deaths heightened expectations of multi-party democracy in both countries when pressure for political change became unstoppable in 1991. But the continued tension bet-

ween the Hutu and the Tutsi has led to the hopes virtually disintegrating.

Members of Burundi's government who survived last October's coup, which fizzled out though not before the massacres had taken their course, last week appointed a new Hutu president - Cyprien Ntaryamira - to replace the murdered Ndadaye.

In Rwanda , efforts to form an interim government incorporating all political parties are deadlocked. This stems from attempts by President Juvenal Habyarimana to assure himself of a cabinet majority by forcing allied parties to appoint ministers who will support his presidency.

In both countries the test now is whether ethnic divisions can be channelled into political rivalries contested within a durable structure capable of diluting the anger which leads to bloodshed. Maj Buyoya believes this will take 10 years.

'Ethnic identity is much stronger than democratic party identity. But over time this will change,' Maj Buyoya said. 'It's necessary to integrate the ethnic reality into the democratic system, because ethnicity is the reality, though over time people will be looking for allies cross-tribally, as differences of belief emerge.'

'Democracy has aggravated tension, because it leads to everybody trying to form their own groups,' said Charles Ntampaka, a law professor at Kigali university and one of Rwanda 's leading human rights activists. 'The only way to change things is if politics is based on the majority of ideas rather than the ethnic majority,' he said.

'The minority is always frustrated, and while they are frustrated there's always the risk of war. It's true that there's a definite ethnic problem. But

the ethnic problem only arises when there's a change of power. The bigger problem is economic - rich against poor, and the rich encouraging the poor to fight,' he said.

Blaming leaders for using ethnic tension as a political tool is as widespread in Rwanda as in Burundi, while historically the role of colonialists must be incorporated into the explanation. Hopes of a solution to tension continue to lie in overhauling the dictatorial systems which have been the dispassionate overseers of the tribal slaughter.

'The problem of Rwanda isn't Hutu versus Tutsi, its the problem of dictatorship,' said Nkiko Nsengimana, head of Rwanda's co-operative movement and a supporter of the formerly Hutu supremacist Republic Democratic Movement (MDR) party, which is now the least radical of the main parties vying for power.

'In Burundi there is no social movement, but in Rwanda there is. But here in Rwanda one group is the social, economic and political elite. They are all one. In other countries, bigger countries, there are different elites - political, cultural, religious. There are 'contra elites' on all levels . . . But here, for those outside the elite, there is nothing but violence. There's no other voice but the massacres. 'Rivalry between the groups always comes from the elite. It never comes from the population. The political class wants to completely polarise political life. In this country the ethnic problems aren't as strong as people say. It's real because it's there, and the person who is excluded has no other voice except for the violent voice,' he said.

Among the thousands of refugees, many of whom were born to refugee parents and have never been home, fear of

the tribally-imbalanced armies and the need for their reform dominates views.

'When there are both Hutus and Tutsis in the army I think things will get better,' said David Nkurikiye, who fled the Burundi town of Bugabira last October and now lives at Kagani camp in Rwanda.

Ethnic cleansing of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda between 1959-61 led the exiled Tutsis to sporadic attempts at armed incursion. All attempts failed until the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) was formed among refugees in Uganda and invaded northern Rwanda in 1990.

The invasion pushed President Habyarimana into accelerating political reforms which would allow the legalisation of opposition parties. One of the greatest successes of democracy in Africa since its emergence in 1990 has been the extent to which the promise of political change brought a ceasefire in the war with the RPF last August, though not until after the displacement of 100,000 Rwandans and thousands of deaths. But this apparent success has allowed new conflicts to dominate Rwanda's political agenda.

'Habyarimana saw multi-partyism as a way of undermining the RPF. But simultaneously this led to other groups - particularly southern Hutus - wanting

to exploit the situation in order to end the dominance of the country by Habyarimana's northern Hutus. The Hutus from the south say the question is not ethnic but regional,' said Major-General Paul Kagame, chairman of the RPF's military high command.

The RPF invasion has split Rwanda's main political parties, all of which except the MDR need coalition alliances to achieve influence. The RPF has allied itself with factions in two parties, splitting the parties largely along tribal lines at a time when multi-tribal parties are essential. This factionalism has prompted a new breed of tribal tension.

The tendency of both nationalities to look not only over one shoulder at tribal rivals within their own countries, but over the other shoulder at the rival tribe across the border appears to be far from over.

'The situation in Burundi has taken away illusions of faith people had in Rwanda's own peace plan of power sharing, the tribal integration of the army and the return of the refugees,' said Justin Mugenzi, head of Rwanda's Liberal Party and leader of the party's strongly anti-Tutsi faction. 'Now people are more suspicious. People are saying : be careful, because the Tutsis may come with their guns.'