

Burundi, Rwandan presidents killed in plane attack.

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KIGALI, April 7 (Reuter) - The presidents of neighbouring Rwanda and Burundi were killed in a rocket attack that destroyed their plane on Wednesday as they flew back together from regional peace talks.

The French-built Rwandan presidential Mystere-Falcon jet was set ablaze as it approached the airport in the Rwandan capital of Kigali, returning from a peace summit in Tanzania, Rwandan officials said.

Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana, 57, and Burundi President Cyprien Ntaryamira, 38, leaders of countries racked by tribal friction, died along with an unknown number of officials.

Diplomats said the killing of the two both heads of state would throw both Rwanda and Burundi, ravaged by conflict between their Hutu majorities and Tutsi minorities, into political chaos and might spark more slaughter.

The United Nations announced in New York the deaths of the two presidents and the Security Council stood for one minute in silent tribute.

Rwanda's U.N. envoy described the attack as assassination.

Diplomats said at least one rocket hit the plane, which was set ablaze and crashed before burning up. There were believed to be no survivors.

Residents in the centre of Kigali, about 15 km (10 miles) west of the airport, said they heard several very loud explosions followed by sporadic shooting and a small plane could be heard circling the airport, apparently unable to land.

"It is a terrible, terrible catastrophe for both countries at this very dangerous time," a Western diplomat in Burundi's capital Bujumbura said. "Anything could happen." But he added that Bujumbura was quiet immediately following the news.

Habyarimana, a Hutu, took power in Rwanda in a coup in 1973 and was blamed by Tutsi-dominated Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels for repeated delays since December in the formation of a new government and parliament to end three years of civil war.

Ntaryamira, 38, was elected in January to succeed Burundi's first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, who was killed by renegade troops from the Tutsi-dominated army in a failed coup in October.

Ndadaye's murder unleashed a wave of Hutu-Tutsi slaughter throughout Burundi in which up to 50,000 people were killed.

In New York, United Nations Under-Secretary-General Chinmaya Gharekhan said the plane carrying crashed at Kigali airport and “both presidents lost their lives”.

Gharekhan said Rwanda’s U.N. ambassador, Jean Damascene Bizimana, told Security Council members that “it was not an accident. It was an assassination. There was rocket fire at the plane...”

Burundian Parliament President Sylvestre Ntibantuganya made a brief address to the nation on television saying he had learned the plane carrying both presidents had had problems and a crisis committee had been formed to investigate.

He appealed for calm but gave no details on the fate of the presidents. Under the Burundian constitution, the head of parliament becomes acting head of state in the event of the president’s death.

The U.N. Security Council, of which Rwanda is a member, paid tribute to both presidents by standing in a moment of silence.

Security Council President Colin Keating said the “two leaders served their respective countries with great dedication and they lost their lives in pursuit of their efforts to restore peace to Burundi and Rwanda”.

At the peace meeting both men attended in the Tanzanian capital of Dar Es Salaam earlier on Wednesday, Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda agreed to send their foreign ministers to Burundi to help rebuild popular confidence in Ntaryamira’s government.

The African leaders also called for reforms to the Burundian army which diplomats said were essential for peace.

Ntaryamira told the Dar Es Salaam conference that he was grateful for neighbouring countries sheltering 800,000 Burundi refugees from the tribal fighting since the killing of Ndadaye.

The United Nations says a total of 375,000 Burundians are registered as refugees in Zaire, Rwanda and Tanzania.

“Burundi is bleeding. I am aware it hurts your economies. Still, we need your help.” said Ntaryamira.

On Rwanda, the African leaders said they were concerned at delays since December in forming transitional institutions as agreed in the northern Tanzanian town of Arusha last August.

The U.N. Security Council on Tuesday renewed the mandate for peacekeeping forces for Rwanda for four months but threatened to pull them out unless the Arusha peace accords were honoured.

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