

War to cut coffee output in Rwanda, Burundi - trade

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MULINDI, Rwanda, April 11 (Reuter) - Coffee output in Burundi and Rwanda this year will fall below previously estimated levels because of violence which is wreaking havoc on coffee industries in the two countries, traders said.

They told Reuters that output in Rwanda, scene of heavy fighting between government forces and rebels of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), would plunge well below the estimated 28,000 tonnes for this 1994/95 year.

Last year, Rwanda produced 29,200 tonnes in the 1993/94 season, from 39,000 in 1992/93.

“At the moment it is even impossible to give estimates of the decline. But there is no doubt that the fall will be sharp,” a Nairobi-based trader told Reuters.

Traders said the latest fighting, which flared up after President Juvenal Habyarimana’s death last week in a plane crash, was the worst since the country gained independence from Belgium in 1962. It has left farms burnt, warehouses and milling plants looted and brought the economy to a complete standstill.

They said even if the country had been spared the fighting, yield would still have fallen on account of a shortage of inputs such as fertilisers and pesticides to spray coffee bushes.

The war in Rwanda has also disrupted transport routes. The northern corridor through Uganda is controlled by the rebels and other routes through Tanzania are disrupted by fighting.

“The violence in Rwanda has only added to the problems of lack of inputs. Output was bound to fall anyway but with the present chaos the fall will be very very sharp,” another Nairobi-based coffee trader told Reuters.

Coffee farms containing some 114 million trees have been substantially reduced since 1989 when the International Coffee Agreement on export quotas collapsed and prices took a nosedive, industry officials say.

In neighbouring Burundi, also hit by tribal fighting and where officials had predicted a moderate increase in its 1994/95 coffee output, traders said production would fall below an earlier estimate of between 25,000 to 30,000 tonnes.

Burundi produced 22,000 tonnes in the 1993/94 season which ended in March. 1992/93 coffee output amounted to 36,400 tonnes.

Peasant farmers produce the bulk of Burundi's high-grade Arabica coffee, of which almost 45 percent is fully washed.

Most of Burundi's small-holder coffee plots are in the northern and central areas of the country, the scene of bitter fighting between the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi tribes.

"The estimates are being revised and with the country embroiled in violence in the producing areas, there is simply no way Burundi could produce between 25,000 to 30,000 tonnes," another trader said.

The traders had no figures for revised estimates. They said as the violence was on going on it was hard to put up a figure.

"Revisions are still going on and only after the dust has settled in the country shall we know the true estimated production figure," one trader added.

Coffee accounts for 80 percent of Burundi's hard currency earnings.

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