

Never again to ethnic genocide, refugee conference says

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BUJUMBURA, Feb 15 (AFP) - A conference on central Africa's millions of refugees opened here Wednesday with the means of preventing further genocide among regional ethnic groups at the top of the agenda.

The call for reconciliation was particularly pressing in the host country Burundi, threatened with carnage among its Tutsi minority and Hutu majority on the scale that wracked neighbouring Rwanda last year.

The international gathering, convened by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), comes as Burundi faces a political crisis that could make nothing but pious hopes of its conclusions.

It opened in a large hotel in a district of the capital Bujumbura which has been sealed off as part of tight security measures by the Tutsi-led Burundian army.

The city has been hit since Tues-

day by an indefinite general strike called by a Tutsi-dominated opposition, which has demanded that Prime Minister Anatole Kanyenkiko resign.

Kanyenkiko, a Hutu member of the former sole ruling Union for National Progress (UPRONA), has been sharply criticised by his own party for refusing to follow its orders and stand down in December because of a parliamentary crisis.

Over three days, delegates to the conference are due to discuss means of reducing what UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogato described as "the immense suffering" of 3.8 million refugees and displaced people in the Great Lakes region.

OAU Secretary-General Salim Ahmed Salim told the conference that the peoples of the area must "break with their tradition of divisiveness and intolerance", saying this was the only way of ending the refugee tragedy.

The crucial question at the conference was how to establish safe conditions for the refugees to return home, Salim said. Delegates plan to discuss all aspects of the refugee crisis, they said.

When Burundi's first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, was assassinated in October 1993 in a foiled military coup which the government survived, some 50,000 people were slaughtered in the ensuing bloodbath.

His successor died in the same suspicious plane crash of April 6 last year as Rwanda's Hutu president Juvenal Habyarimana, but Burundi then avoided the kind of carnage that ensued in Rwanda.

Up to a million Rwandan Tutsis and opposition Hutus were killed by the Hutu-dominated former government army and extremist militias, before the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) seized power in July.

Millions of people fled their homes, almost all Hutus fearful of reprisals, and two million refugees are surviving in camps mainly in eastern Zaire, but also in Burundi, Tanzania and Uganda.

Rwanda has recovered a degree of calm, but Burundi has become a powderkeg because of the political cri-

sis and the activities of extremists on both sides who oppose any power-sharing deal.

Early in the day, people come down to Bujumbura from the surrounding hills to go to market and assess the situation in the capital before returning to their villages.

The strike call has been widely followed in the highland nation's capital, which is almost under siege and where since December an overnight curfew has been in force.

Grenades have been exploded apparently in a bid to intimidate people from going to work, but following several outbreaks of ethnic violence, fear alone seemed to be enough to keep people at home.

"This is a work stoppage in the wake of terrorism," Kanyenkiko declared. He has called on the security forces to crack down on young Tutsi militias and others opposed to current power-sharing arrangements to stave off strife.

The conference gathers regional officials, the OAU's international commission on refugees, representatives from Belgium, Britain, France and the United States and members of non-governmental organisations.

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