

A Small Girl's Silence Tells Story of Burundi's Crisis

Scott Peterson

Christian Science Monitor, November 5, 1993

Two Central African states tried this year to resolve ethnic tensions, Rwanda with a peace accord and Burundi with a democratic vote. But a failed coup has sparked untold tragedy.

KISIVA, BURUNDI — THE lone four-year-old girl stands in the muddy road in northern Burundi. She seems not to notice the arrival of other people. She stares, then turns silently and walks away.

It soon becomes apparent that she has been left here to die, the only survivor of three ethnic battles that have convulsed her village in the past two weeks. Her family and their neighbors all lie dead in stark silence inside their homes and roadside shops.

The horrors abound here, grim evidence that an Oct. 21 military coup in this tiny country reignited tribal hatreds fierce enough to leave thousands dead across three-quarters of Burundi.

Members of the Tutsi ethnic group have ruled Burundi for centuries, though they make up just 15 percent of the population. A democratic vote in July, the country's first, gave the majority Hutus power for the first time since Burundi's independence in 1962, but the Tutsis retained control of the Army.

Last month's coup - led by Army officers against the country's young democratic government - has come to nothing. Senior military officers have distanced themselves from the coup plotters and pledged to return troops to their barracks. On Wednesday they agreed to the demands of remaining government ministers, who took refuge in the French Embassy, for an international protection force.

But the damage from the coup cannot be undone. President Melchior Ndadaye is dead. Roughly 600,000 mostly Hutu refugees - more than 10 percent of the country's 5.6 million population - have fled into neighboring Rwanda, Zaire, and Tanzania, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Ethnic killings continue, and the worst areas are still inaccessible except by helicopter.

Burundians of both tribes have not forgotten the massacres of the recent past. In 1972 at least 100,000 died, most of them Hutus. In August, 5,000 died during a Hutu farmers' uprising. The new violence brings particular sadness, as it comes so closely after successful elections.

The shops in this village tell the story. Two Hutus lie in a room full of crates, empty bottles, and a bicycle.

The killers did not bother to push open the door - they just shoved their guns through the glass window and opened fire.

The largest shop has iron bars protecting the windows and thick doors. Used bullet cartridges litter the ground outside. Spilled grain covers the floor inside. More than 20 people - men, women, and children - had sought refuge. All of them died.

These were the last people who knew the name of the little girl, the sole survivor. The military is not entirely to blame. Violence first came to Kisiva a day after the coup, when Hutus reportedly killed Tutsis to avenge the death of the president.

Most disturbing, say survivors of the ethnic battles, is the changing nature of the conflict. The first days after the coup saw random and massive massacres by both tribes and the military. Now, the military is carrying out what some Hutus call a "secret, silent repression" throughout the countryside. Hutus and independent observers say that the Army now works from lists of prominent and educated Hutus. At one lonely checkpoint, three Hutus were killed one day, 17 the next, and six more the next.

Tactics have also changed

"You don't hear any sounds of a gun, because now they do their killing quietly, and try not to leave a trace," says a Hutu who has traveled widely in the north since the coup. "They gag people, then beat them."

In Ngozi, soldiers have begun separating Hutus and Tutsis, and schools have closed. To protect themselves,

Hutus cut down trees to block all the roads, "to keep soldiers from coming to find us," one Hutu says.

Up on the Rwandan border, 60,000 Hutus wait in the Saga refugee camp, just one of 11 such sites along the border. Though the muddy slopes offer little comfort, refugees continue to pour in by the tens of thousands.

Hatungimana Luc escaped with his wife and three children; a fourth was "left behind." Mr. Luc, a Hutu peasant from the north, recalls how Tutsi soldiers came to his house, killing his father with a bayonet. "Everybody ran, when we heard that the military were coming," he said. His face is void of emotion, due to exhaustion. "Anyone left behind is dead."

Relief agencies worry that the coming rains, already late, will add to the misery by turning the camps into quagmires. "Before we were afraid of the drought," said Ellen Colthoff, director of Doctors Without Borders-Holland in Rwanda, which set up the first camp dispensaries last week. "Now we are afraid of the rains."

The United Nations World Food Programme began delivering food aid on Tuesday, but all the agencies say that they cannot cope with the needy Burundians in addition to the 350,000 displaced people from Rwanda's civil war that they are already caring for in the north. The refugees who have fled also feel overwhelmed by their situation, and hope that peace can be negotiated in the capital.

But Hutus in the countryside are still vulnerable to the Tutsi military, Luc says. "We people in the villages have only machetes, but the Army has assault rifles. How can we fight them?"