

Rwanda's Uwilingiyimana was crusader for justice

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KIGALI, April 8 (Reuter) - Agathe Uwilingiyimana, the Rwandan prime minister murdered by the army on Thursday, fought and lost a battle for ethnic reconciliation and an end to oppression of women in the central African state.

Uwilingiyimana, 41-year-old daughter of peasant Rwandans south of Kigali, joined politics in January 1992 shortly after President Juvenal Habyarimana - killed in a rocket attack on his plane on Wednesday - bowed to the wind of change sweeping across Africa and allowed opposition politics.

A former high school teacher of chemistry, Uwilingiyimana was a dynamic and shrewd politician who led a campaign in high public offices for tribal reconciliation and tolerance between her majority Hutu people and the minority Tutsi community.

She also led a spirited fight to change Rwandan customs that de-

pictured the woman as a weak creation who must be shunted out of public service and must be obedient and loyal to man.

For that, male critics considered her arrogant, non-conformist and a campaigner against Rwandan traditions.

"She strongly defended the rights of women, that women had a role to play in development, in business - and not just making breakfast for their husbands," a Kigali resident said.

"At one political rally, President Habyarimana called out, 'you woman' - she stood up and pointedly replied, 'don't call me that. I am not your wife,'" the resident added.

The resident said that Uwilingiyimana refused to leave her ministerial job in June 1993 after hooligans ambushed her, whipped and robbed her in a bid to force her out of office.

A staunch campaigner for an end

to Habyarimana's singular hold on power, Uwilingiyimana attended many secret meetings on how to force a reluctant Habyarimana to accept pluralism and on guaranteeing Rwandan basic freedoms and protecting human rights, academics who knew her say.

She joined the opposition Republican and Democratic Movement (MDR) in January 1992 and four months later Dismas Nsensiyaremye – the first opposition prime minister under a power-sharing scheme – made her basic and secondary education minister.

“She was so impressive, had solid policies and was a gifted orator. Academics considered her among the best performers in that cabinet,” the Kigali resident said.

Uwilingiyimana replaced Nsensiyaremye as prime minister on July 17, 1993 – just the second African woman to hold a prime minister's job. Her appointment came only a week after newly-elected President Melchior Ndadaye in neighbouring Burundi named Sylvie Kinigi as the country's prime minister.

Kinigi and Uwilingiyimana are believed to have been Africa's first and so far only women to serve as prime ministers.

Uwilingiyimana's powers as prime minister were undermined by tribal-based divisions in her MDR party and in the last four months appeared unable to effect policies as government and opposition squabbled on when to install a new transitional leadership.

Transitional institutions were meant to have been set up in Rwanda in December under peace accords with the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) in August 1993. A ceasefire reached as part of that peace plan crumbled when violence between government and RPF soldiers erupted in Kigali on Thursday.

A tall, light skinned woman of strong build, Uwilingiyimana was married to a university employee and had five children.

A United Nations spokesman in Kigali said Uwilingiyimana was killed near the presidential palace in an area where U.N. forces had been denied access.

A government statement in Brussels said 10 Belgian soldiers, members of the second commando battalion of Flawinne in Belgium detailed to guard Uwilingiyimana, were also killed.

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