

At least 70 people have been massacred in the mainly-Hutu north of Burundi

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AFP, January 29, 1995

BUJUMBURA, Jan 29 (AFP) - At least 70 people, mostly women and children, have been massacred in the mainly-Hutu north of Burundi, in the latest outbreak of ethnic bloodletting, US Ambassador Robert Krueger said Sunday.

Men wearing army uniforms and civilians accompanying them carried out the killings this month in the province of Kayanza, Krueger said, quoting eyewitnesses he said he interviewed personally on visits there.

Because the region is 98 percent Hutu, the people slaughtered were probably Hutus, the envoy told AFP.

Hutus form the ethnic majority in Burundi, while Tutsis dominate the army.

The ambassador, who denounced the killings in a statement sent to Burundian television and radio, said: "I saw the bodies, I took pictures, nobody can say it didn't happen."

His report, written in French,

was the latest documenting continued ethnic unrest in the wake of a civil war that left tens of thousands dead following the death of the first Hutu president in a failed military coup by the army in October 1993.

In the statement, Krueger said that after he received reports of killings carried out between January 4 and 8, and January 20 and 22, he visited the region twice, did his own research on the events and spoke with survivors.

He said he obtained "direct proof" of at least 70 murders committed in the province.

But obviously that was far less than the real death toll, he added.

Many unidentified victims were buried without being documented, while other bodies were thrown into the Nkokoma River, he went on, noting that none of this had been reported by the press, civilian government or security forces.

Krueger said in the statement that he had a list of the victims' names and gave examples of atrocities he saw.

He had photographed the bodies of "three innocent children" on Busokoza hill. The corpses, along with those of the children's mother and grandmother, had been left by the killers in the middle of a banana plantation, beside a pig sty, he wrote.

Less than two kilometers (a mile) away, he was taken to a mass grave where 12 bodies – the remains of several families – had been buried.

He also met survivors in the hills and in hospital. They had machete, bayonette and gunshot wounds.

Most of the victims were women and children, probably because the men were able to run faster into the forest, he added.

These little children belonged to no armed band. They were not hiding or using weapons – they were too small even to carry them. Despite this, their skulls had been crushed and their throats slashed with bayonettes, the ambassador wrote.

Gangs of extremist Hutus, referred to as "armed bands," have been attacking Burundian army patrols and positions since last year.

The assailants are supporters of exiled former interior minister

Leonard Nyangoma, who opposes the power-sharing scheme between the moderate majority of his party, the mainly-Hutu Front for Democracy in Burundi, and the opposition.

In retaliation for the clashes, Tutsi militia have been carrying out punitive attacks on politicians and presumed supporters of "Nyangoma's armed bands."

The north, where huge camps of displaced Burundians and Rwandan refugees add to an already explosive situation, has been a particular target.

By late last year, charities were reporting weekly massacres in northern Burundi, where the government is fragile and threatens to collapse if large scale massacres erupt similar to killings that occurred in neighboring Rwanda last year.

The armed bands "should be arrested", the ambassador said, but they will not be stopped by the killing of women and children, he added.

He said the army had made "significant progress" recently, but that the military authorities should keep their troops under total control.

Arms searches were often used as an excuse to take revenge and carry out massacres, he said.

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