

Burundi on brink of bloodbath

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BUJUMBURA, March 22 (AFP) - The tiny central African nation of Burundi is teetering on the brink of a bloodbath after a new surge of murderous tribal fighting.

One of the last taboos was broken Sunday with the massacre of three whites, one a four-year-old girl.

In Bujumbura, Hutus fled a working class neighbourhood Wednesday as troops of the Tutsi-dominated army patrolled the streets after gangs of young Hutus and Tutsis fought deadly battles and three men and a woman sprayed Tutsi-frequented bars with bullets.

But similar clashes have been going on for months throughout the country, and fears are high that Burundi will follow neighbouring Rwanda into savage civil war.

The two countries are virtually identical: both were once ruled by Belgium, each has high grasslands and mountains, a dense population of around seven million, and the same ethnic mix: 85 percent Hutu, 14 per-

cent Tutsi, and one percent pygmy-like Twa. In both countries, the Tutsis were the traditional ruling and military caste, despite their small numbers.

Or such was the ethnic mix until in Rwanda last year, Hutu militias armed with machetes and garden hoes massacred hundreds of thousands of Tutsis – men, women and children – as well as moderate Hutus and their families. But the Tutsis won the civil war, and millions of Hutus fled.

They are now in refugee camps in neighbouring countries, too fearful of revenge attacks to return, and facing starvation as international donors weary of feeding them while trying to help displaced civilians from Chechnya to the former Yugoslavia.

"Nothing is forbidden here any more," lamented a Burundian army officer after killers presumed to be Hutu extremists gunned down three Belgians and two Burundians on Sunday evening as they were returning to

the capital.

"We have entered an extremely dangerous phase of madness, where even the principle of the untouchable foreigner has disappeared," the officer added.

Belgian Foreign Minister Frank Vandembroucke said the Belgians were "massacred" although they made it clear – as they tried to take cover – that they were foreigners accompanied by children.

Moderate Hutu and Tutsi politicians are sharing fragile power, but it is the extremists who are calling the shots, with Tutsi militias and Hutu gangs answering massacre with massacre.

President Sylvestre Ntibantunganya, a Hutu, warned recently that for several months now Burundi has been "sliding into Hell".

In the capital, Tutsi militias are forcing Hutus out of entire neighbourhoods while the Hutus complain the regular Tutsi soldiers stand by.

Over the border in Zaire, members of the defeated Rwandan Hutu Interahamwe militias and army are reported to be well armed, undergoing hit-and-run training, and beginning to cooperate with their fellow tribesmen in Burundi.

Burundian former interior minister Leonard Nyangoma, a Hutu, is also in Zaire after rejecting the idea of allowing the Tutsis any power at all. He is sending militias to carry

out constant guerrilla attacks against Burundi troops, their officers say.

The UN special representative in Burundi, Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, reckons that fewer than 100 influential Burundians are pushing the country toward civil war, but their private armies are growing all the time.

The Tutsi commanders of the army are meanwhile regularly tempted to mount a coup d'etat, or at least impose a state of emergency under which military rule would prevail, while the presidential camp favours foreign intervention, believing the army is likely to fall under the control of Tutsi extremists.

Burundi's slide began with a failed coup on October 21, 1993, when soldiers assassinated the country's first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, who had won multi-party elections the previous June.

The soldiers also killed Ntibantunganya's wife, and inter-ethnic fighting that followed resulted in some 50,000 deaths.

The United Nations, which is planning to mount genocide trials in Rwanda, also wants a commission of inquiry established to investigate the unpunished murders in Burundi, where well-armed young men and even women seem helpless to prevent themselves from carrying out more and more massacres.

Tutsi politicians who backed the abortive 1993 coup, notably former

president Jean-Baptiste Bagaza, said to have links with Libya and Uganda, are meanwhile pursuing a policy of a slow return to power.

They are backed by well-paid militias who effectively control the streets of Bujumbura, where a dusk-to-dawn curfew has been in force

since December, but which has not halted frequent attacks after dark.

"The militiamen are not interested in peace," commented a missionary. "They believe the Tutsis are still Burundi's natural rulers."

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