

Burundians pay last respects to slain leaders

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BUJUMBURA, April 16 (Reuter) - Thousands of people attended the funeral on Saturday of Burundi's president, killed in a rocket attack on his plane last week in the neighbouring blood-drenched central African state of Rwanda.

The capital Bujumbura remained calm despite tensions between the majority Hutu people of the late President Cyprien Ntaryamira and the Tutsi tribe, the country's former rulers.

Top army officers carried Ntaryamira's coffin out of the Roman Catholic cathedral to a heroes' burial square in a gesture widely seen as a sign of continued reconciliation between the Tutsi-dominated military and the government.

Other army officers carried the flag-draped coffins of finance minister Benard Ciiza and Cypriaque Simbizi, minister delegate for administration and territorial affairs.

The Burundi leaders, together with Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana, were killed as they returned from a regional peace summit in Tanzania on April 6.

The death of Habyarimana triggered an ethnic bloodbath in Rwanda in which thousands have been killed and tens of thousands have fled to Zaire, Burundi and Tanzania.

But Burundi, already shattered by ethnic slaughter that followed the killing by renegade Tutsi paratroops of its President Melchior Ndadaye last year, stayed calm.

A military band played the last post as the coffins were lowered into tombs.

Ntaryamira was the second Burundian president to be killed in seven months. Ndadaye, the first democratically elected and first Hutu leader of Burundi since independence from Belgium in 1962, was murdered last October.

At the cathedral, mourners held aloft pictures of the 38-year-old president and chanted : "Fare thee well" and "We shall meet in paradise".

Parliamentary speaker Sylvestre Ntibantunganya, elevated to acting president, and the families of the slain leaders led mourners in viewing the remains and laying wreaths.

"It is important that no one thinks these leaders were killed by one tribe," Ntibantunganya told Reuters. "We have seen enough bloodshed, enough chaos, enough anarchy. It is time to heal these passions, time to look to peace in the future."

Ntibantunganya also read a communique from the Tanzanian meeting which called for urgent reform of the Burundi army and other security services and demanded ethnic reconciliation.

Ntibantunganya's wife was bayoneted to death by soldiers in the failed October coup that killed Ndadaye.

Ntaryamira, an agronomist, was elected as a compromise after opposition leaders rejected Ntibantunganya's ascension to power.

Ndadaye's death sparked violence between the Hutus and the Tutsi tribespeople that one minister said may have killed more than 150,000 people.

Most mourners were from Ntaryamira's Hutu tribe, who make up some 85 percent of the population. But the Tutsi, who dominate the army and top government posts, were also present.

Archbishop Simon Ntamwana called on Burundians during the mass to learn to live in harmony, respect each other and strive to rebuild a country he said was on the verge of destruction as a result of hate.

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