

Explosions rock Rwandan capital after presidents killed

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KIGALI, April 7 (Reuter) - Explosions rocked the Rwandan capital Kigali on Thursday and heavy fighting broke out around the presidential palace, hours after the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi were killed in a rocket attack on their plane as they flew back from regional peace talks, witnesses said.

"There is plenty of shooting out there, and we can also hear some shelling," a Kigali resident said.

Diplomats said the killing of the two heads of state would throw Rwanda and Burundi, ravaged by conflict between their Hutu majorities and Tutsi minorities, into political chaos and might trigger more slaughter. Both dead presidents were Hutus.

A government statement broadcast on state radio appealed for calm and asked residents to stay in their homes until further notice. It also told security forces to restore order and said the government had formed

an emergency committee to handle the crisis. It did not name the members.

The statement said President Juvenal Habyarimana, 57, and Burundi President Cyprien Ntaryamira, 38, leaders of countries racked by tribal friction, died along with two Burundi ministers and five senior Rwandan officials. It said the plane's French crew members were killed but gave no figures.

A Defence Ministry statement also broadcast on Rwandan radio said the plane "was shot down by unidentified elements in circumstances which are still unclear."

But a government official who was at Kigali airport to welcome Habyarimana home told Reuters two rockets hit the plane as it landed. "They did not have a chance, the plane just burned."

Government sources said Belgian soldiers deployed under the United

Nations mission in Rwanda were guarding the airport, which was temporarily closed.

Rwandan troops guarded key installations in the capital and patrolled streets. Most civilians stayed home but some residents walked in groups in neighbourhoods, speculating on the motives for the killing.

“You really don’t want to go out there when we can hear the shooting. No one knows who is in control,” a resident said.

Germany’s ambassador in Kigali, Dieter Hoelscher, was quoted by German television as saying eyewitnesses had reported that shots were fired at the U.N. headquarters in the capital.

Rwandan Foreign Minister Jean Marie Ngendahayo told reporters that the deaths of Habyarimana and Ntaryamira were no accident : “What happened was an assassination.”

An official of the former rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) reached in Kigali said the group was not responsible.

In New York, the U.N. announced the deaths of the presidents and the Security Council stood for one minute in silent tribute.

Residents in the centre of Kigali, about 15 km (nine miles) west of the airport, said they had heard several very loud explosions followed by sporadic shooting and a small plane could be heard circling the airport, apparently unable to land.

“It is a terrible, terrible catastrophe for both countries at this very dangerous time,” a Western diplomat in the Burundi capital Bujumbura said. “Anything could happen.” But he said the city was quiet after the news broke.

Habyarimana took power in Rwanda in a coup in 1973 and was blamed by the Tutsi-dominated RPF rebels for repeated delays since December in forming a new government and parliament to end three years of civil war.

Ntaryamira was elected in January to succeed Burundi’s first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, who was killed by renegade troops from the Tutsi-dominated army in a failed coup last October.

Ndadaye’s murder unleashed a wave of Hutu-Tutsi slaughter throughout Burundi in which up to 50,000 people were killed.

At the peace meeting in Dar Es Salaam on Wednesday, Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda agreed to send their foreign ministers to Burundi to help rebuild confidence in Ntaryamira’s government.

The African leaders also called for reforms to the Burundian army which diplomats said were essential for peace.

Ntaryamira told the conference he was grateful to neighbouring countries for sheltering 800,000 Burundi refugees from the tribal fighting since

Ndadaye's death.

Tanzania said on Thursday it was
stunned by the killings and declared

a day of mourning.

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