

Burundi faced the risk of new ethnic violence

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BUJUMBURA, Feb 1 (AFP) - Burundi faced the risk of new ethnic violence as grenades exploded in the capital Wednesday and the opposition mounted a general strike to topple a government formed to bring about national reconciliation.

Witnesses said the grenades went off in north Bujumbura districts which are strongholds of the Tutsi-dominated Union for National Progress (UPRONA), which called the strike to undermine the coalition with Hutu majority parties.

No casualties were reported and observers said the blasts were probably intended to intimidate workers into staying home in line with the two-day strike call.

Government offices were closed and many schoolchildren returned home for the lack of teachers, while staff at the central bank deserted the premises early in the morning.

In the city centre, however, the main market and shops opened as usual and business activity was nor-

mal. Security forces escorted the few state-owned buses running between central Bujumbura and outlying areas.

The strike was called on Tuesday by Charles Mukasi, the leader of UPRONA, which is a partner essential to the coalition with Hutu parties. He said it was "urgent" to "topple the current government at all costs".

Mukasi, who has led the former ruling party for a year, is from the majority Hutu but he is regarded as a hardliner.

He has been accused of backing a coup bid by soldiers from the Tutsi-led army in October 1993, in which the country's first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, was assassinated - an allegation he strongly denies.

Ndadaye's government, dominated by the Front for Democracy in Burundi (FRODEBU), survived, but the foiled coup led to a wave of ethnic slaughter in which some 50,000 people were killed.

The central African highland na-

tion has since teetered on the brink, with outbreaks of violence, and the new coalition government was formed in October last year after dealings among parties to stave off renewed carnage.

Late Tuesday, the UN Security Council expressed alarm at the crisis, and issued an emergency declaration denouncing "all attempts aimed at threatening the existence of the coalition government by intimidation and diktat."

But Mukasi on Wednesday charged that the Security Council had bowed to "manipulation" and was "very ill-informed about what is really happening in Burundi".

In a statement, Mukasi said UPRONA "officially withdrew from the government more than a month ago" to demand the resignation of parliamentary speaker Jean Minani, elected amid controversy.

UPRONA at the weekend dismissed Prime Minister Anatole Kanyenyiko from its ranks for failing to toe the party line. Kanyenyiko had refused to resign and responded that he was still a party member.

"The Security Council is subject to manipulation," Mukasi said, in implicit criticism of the UN special en-

voy to Burundi, Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, who has been accused of backing the ruling FRODEBU.

UPRONA has eight portfolios in the cabinet, but divisions in the party ranks became evident in December.

Minani, who later stepped down, was accused of publicly calling for the slaughter of Tutsis after the murder of Ndadaye, an allegation he has strongly denied.

After UPRONA sacked Kanyenyiko, President Sylvestre Ntibantunganya called Monday's cabinet meeting to test his support in the government, warning that any minister who failed to show up would be dismissed.

Two UPRONA members were consequently sacked by the head of state. Mukasi then called for a new government. "We want a prime minister and not an agent of FRODEBU," he said.

UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali on Wednesday stated that the world "could not accept a repetition in Burundi of the tragic events of last year in (neighbouring) Rwanda," where troops and extremist Hutu militias slaughtered up to a million Tutsis and opposition Hutus.

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