

Rwanda, Burundi leaderless at critical juncture

Annie Thomas

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NAIROBI, April 7 (AFP) – Rwanda and Burundi, leaderless after their presidents died together in a plane crash Wednesday, must now brace themselves for a possible resurgence in civil war and inter-ethnic killing.

Juvenal Habyarimana, 57, of Rwanda and Burundi counterpart Cyprien Ntaryamira, 39, were returning from a conference in Tanzania when the Rwandan presidential plane went down as it approached the airport in the Rwandan capital Kigali.

All of the 10-12 people aboard the French-piloted aircraft perished in the crash, which Rwandan United Nations Ambassador Jean Damascene Bizimana blamed on rocket fire.

“It was not an accident. It was an assassination,” Bizimana charged. “The presidents were killed by the enemies of peace in Rwanda and Burundi.”

Regardless of the circumstances, the deaths of the two men stunned the two often turbulent east-central African neighbors.

Burundi has now lost two presidents in six months. Melchior Ndadaye, elected in June as the first head of state to come from the majority Hutu group, died in an abortive coup last October 21 staged by Tutsi soldiers.

Tens of thousands of people

were subsequently killed in inter-ethnic massacres, while an estimated 700,000 fled to Rwanda, Tanzania and Zaire.

As a result of negotiations, mediation and finally compromise between the government and opposition forces, Ntaryamira was elected president in January by the National Assembly. A government was formed and reshuffled the following month.

But these first tentative steps toward stability have not been fully successful. Several hundred people have died in the last few weeks in communities just outside the capital Bujumbura.

Distrust between the government and the army remains acute and Burundis now live in fear of being attacked by their neighbors.

“It is a major test,” assembly speaker Sylvestre Ntibantunganya said of the future of Burundi.

He told AFP in a telephone conversation that Ntaryamira, along with two cabinet ministers, had decided to travel aboard the Rwandan presidential plane in order to hasten their return from Tanzania to Bujumbura.

In Rwanda, the internal situation has deteriorated since February, when two leading figures – including a cabinet minister – were assassinated.

Clashes between Tutsis and Hutus have left dozens of people dead in Ki-

gali, as political parties bicker over the composition of the government and a transitional parliament.

The transitional institutions are to include members of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the former rebel movement of the minority Tutsis.

Their participation was secured in a peace accord signed in Arusha, Tanzania last August 4 after a three-year civil war between the RPR and mainly Hutu government forces.

A United Nations mission, supported by 2,500 soldiers, was deployed in

Rwanda as part of the agreement.

The RPR had denounced President Habyarimana, a Hutu, as a "terrorist" and accused him of trying to impose his ministerial and parliamentary candidates.

Unlike Burundi, which until last year had been led by the minority Tutsis, who represent 15 percent of the population in the two countries, the Hutus have been in power in Rwanda since the 1960s.

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