

foreign policy *in focus*



Interhemispheric Resource Center
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Burundi and the Crisis in Central Africa

Since 1993 approximately 150,000 Burundians—2.5% of the population in this tiny Central African country—have been slaughtered in ethnic-based massacres of civilians by the ruling Tutsi forces and insurgent Hutu militias. This is only part of a wave of politically motivated genocides that have swept across Central Africa. During three months in 1994, a small Hutu ruling clique in neighboring Rwanda, fearing they would lose political power, unleashed the extermination of about 800,000 people, mainly minority Tutsis. Chased from Rwanda by a Tutsi exile army, the “genocidaires” used refugee camps in Zaire as bases for murderous forays into Rwanda to commit more genocide, incursions into

Key Points

- Colonial-induced animosities have fueled a three-decades-long conflict in Burundi, turning the country into a powder keg primed by fears for personal security.
- Since 1993 some 150,000 Burundian civilians have been murdered in spreading, politically motivated, genocidal conflicts in Central Africa.
- The international community, which failed to act when the crisis began, now faces a major challenge in Burundi and more widely in Central Africa.

Burundi to aid Hutu guerrillas fighting the minority Tutsi regime, and for “ethnic cleansing” in Zaire’s Kivu Province. Rwanda (and, reportedly, also Burundi) retaliated by supporting Zairian Tutsi attacks on the Hutu refugee camps. The regional crisis and the continuing political disintegration in Zaire are now major challenges to the international community.

The current violence in Burundi is not a continuation of ancient tribal hatreds. It is the culmination of Belgium’s colonial discrimination against the Hutu majority, subsequent political competition

between Tutsi and Hutu elites, and the fear spawned by escalating cycles of political retaliation in Rwanda as well as Burundi. Through military-backed, one-party governments, a ruling clique from Burundi’s 15% Tutsi minority has maintained political domination since shortly after independence in 1962. Armed Hutu challenges resulted in major massacres of Hutu civilians in 1965, 1972 (when 100,000 to 200,000, including almost the entire Hutu educated elite were murdered), 1988 (20,000 victims), and 1991. Thus even before the current wave of violence, the ethnic-based contest for political power had been enormously complicated by overwhelming fears for personal security and survival. As Central African expert Rene Lemarchand writes,

“the conviction held by both Tutsi and Hutu [is] that unless the other’s crimes are retaliated against by retribution, planned annihilation will inevitably follow.”

A moment of hope appeared in 1992 when Tutsi President Pierre Buyoya, under heavy international pressure, agreed to allow a transition to multiparty democracy. His experiment, however, was short lived. Despite his ruling UPRONA party’s efforts to co-opt Hutu support, the Hutu-led FRODEBU opposition party swept the June 1993 elections. But four months later, President Melchior Ndadaye was assassinated by a hardline faction of the Tutsi-dominated military, precipitating ethnic massacres on both sides. The violence also increased insecurity in Rwanda, contributing to the April 1994 genocide there.

From 1993 to the present, Burundi has experienced what many call a “creeping coup.” Tutsi hardliners manipulated the judicial system, assassinated key Hutu opponents, and used the army to intimidate Hutu civilians and parliamentarians. This forced FRODEBU moderates to accept a series of increasingly disadvantageous powersharing agreements that eroded their 1993 election victory. By 1995 political power had largely reverted to the Tutsi-dominated army, UPRONA, and paramilitary militias.

This undercut the political legitimacy of those Hutu moderates committed to peaceful change. Former FRODEBU Minister Leonard Nyangoma responded by organizing the CNDD, a Hutu-led political movement-cum-rebel-army, which called for restoration of democracy. Using Zairian bases and supply channels and supported by many FRODEBU members inside Burundi, the CNDD fielded thousands of insurgents. Along with two smaller groups, it won control of much of Burundi’s increasingly mono-ethnic rural countryside. The army concentrated on defending the largely Tutsi-dominated cities, towns, and displaced persons camps. As dramatic massacres by both sides prove, civilians have been the main victims. The late-1996 conflict in eastern Zaire eliminated CNDD base camps, but this is likely to prove a temporary setback rather than a strategic defeat.

During 1995 and early 1996, the UN, African states, and the U.S. launched more intensive efforts to reduce the carnage and coax the two warring sides into peace negotiations.

Initially, the Clinton administration did not play a major role in addressing the crisis. It was UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali who first lobbied leading nations to create a multilateral intervention force to deter the massacres. In early 1996, regional "Great Lakes States" (Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Zaire, and Kenya), through former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, launched their own initiatives to mediate the conflict.

Concerned with swelling refugee numbers and threats of political instability, this African coalition pressed Burundi to follow through on its acceptance of a regional military force to guarantee security and move forward the process of negotiations (as part of the so-called Arusha Peace Plan). These efforts were interrupted in July 1996 when the military reinstated former President Buyoya. The coalition retaliated with regional economic sanctions, to be lifted only if Buyoya restores Parliament, unbans political parties, and enters into unconditional negotiations with all factions to seek a political solution.

To its credit, the Clinton administration, since early 1996, has become more engaged in the deepening Burundi crisis. Clinton named former Congressman Howard Wolpe, a leading figure in African policymaking, as a special presidential envoy instructed to work toward a political solution in Burundi. The administration has joined the European Union (EU) in ending aid to the Burundi government and has partially supported the regional political, military, and economic policies toward Burundi. Despite Republican-led reservations about U.S. involvement in UN peacekeeping following the Somali debacle, the U.S. emerged as the principal Security Council supporter of contingency planning for humanitarian intervention.

Yet, the U.S. still lacks a fully coherent policy that can provide effective leadership to help resolve the conflict and prevent a slide toward more genocide. It failed to fully back UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali's plan for a 25,000 to 50,000-person international force that could be deployed to deter massacres without the consent of the warring parties. While Washington support-

ed regional African leaders' call for a Western-funded regional force to provide security for Burundian peace negotiations, this became moot when the post-coup government backed out of the agreement to accept the force.

Washington's alternative September 1996 proposal for a Western financed and trained African Crisis Responses Force (ACRF) for Burundian and other emergencies is too little, too late. The ACRF's all-African 5-10,000 troop force would require at least six months training, enter Burundi only with the "acquiescence" of all parties, and be limited to assuring distribution of humanitarian assistance to displaced and vulnerable persons in a few "safe areas." Regrettably, the plan was introduced without adequate advance consultation with potential African participants, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and the UN.

While Washington has had some success in promoting informal talks between the Buyoya regime and CNDD insurgents, it lacks an adequate strategy to promote a political settlement. In October 1996, Secretary of State Warren Christopher unsuccessfully lobbied the regional African leaders to relax economic sanctions, arguing that Burundi had partially met the political conditions required for lifting them. This was intended to bolster Buyoya against Tutsi extremist hardliners, even though the Burundian leader had not yet addressed the major substantive issues for political negotiations.

While failing to mobilize effective international pressure on the CNDD to reach a political settlement, Washington has also been unable to curb external arms supplies flowing into Central Africa.

Finally, the U.S. has not specifically addressed the need to find ways to deal with the culture of impunity for human rights violators that enhances the risk of further genocide.

Key Problems

- Although the U.S. has become active in both planning for possible international military intervention and in facilitating negotiations among Burundi's warring parties, it has not developed a fully coherent approach to the conflict.
- A U.S.-proposed, all-African force falls short of what is necessary either to prevent imminent genocide or to promote a political settlement.
- The U.S. failed to adequately support regional economic sanctions against the Buyoya regime and to exert diplomatic pressure on insurgents to limit military escalation and civilian casualties.
- The U.S. has neglected to confront the culture of impunity for human rights violations that prevails in Burundi.

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Burundi cannot be viewed in isolation. A strong and coherent U.S. regional policy toward Burundi, Rwanda, and a now rapidly disintegrating situation in Zaire is urgently needed to avoid new rounds of reciprocal ethnic violence, further refugee flows, and the spread of economic and social chaos in Central Africa.

In Burundi itself, a strengthened U.S. policy could help prevent further expansion of genocide, a flow of hundreds of thousands of new refugees, and possible mass starvation in Tutsi urban centers and displaced persons camps now surrounded by insurgent Hutu forces.

Key Recommendations

- The crisis challenges the post-cold war world to raise the priority of human rights and establish international norms and procedures to stop genocide.
- The U.S. should support early introduction into Burundi of a UN-authorized, international military force in order to advance peace negotiations and deter further massacres.
- The U.S. should reinforce regional economic sanctions against the illegal Buyoya regime and diplomatically press the insurgents to move toward a political solution rather than military victory.

The spreading violence raises issues that reach far beyond the traditional confines of Africa policy. Is the post-cold war world ready to raise the priority of human rights by intervening to prevent genocide, i.e., the intentional destruction of racial, religious, and ethnic groups? Can the U.S. and other governments establish, even in an economically and strategically peripheral region, international norms and processes for limiting violent ethnic conflict that can be applied to other areas?

The first objective of an enhanced U.S. policy on Burundi must be to work with the parties to the conflict, regional African leaders, the OAU, and the UN to achieve a long-term political solution based on majority rule, protection of minority rights, and national reconciliation.

Such a policy should include the following major components:

- Articulation by high-level U.S. policymakers, including the president, of America's and the world's moral and political interest in finding ways to cooperatively address the genocidal political conflicts in Central Africa.
- The urgent introduction into Burundi of a strong international military force with the dual mission of providing a secure atmosphere for peace negotiations and preventing further massacres.

The lesson of Rwanda in 1994 (and Bosnia in 1995) is that a successful political negotiation cannot be achieved in an intense conflict over national identity unless political extremists are controlled by a strong international military force. A top U.S. priority should be to persuade the parties to accept a multilateral force as quickly as possible. The fallback option, given the scale of the violence and rapid onset of past genocides,

should be robust intervention, even without the consent of the conflicting parties.

The force should be authorized and guided by the UN and the OAU. But due to its ambitious mandate for peace enforcement rather than simply peacekeeping, it must be logistically supported by the U.S. and leading European powers (as in Haiti and Bosnia). Ground troops should come from interested regional actors (e.g., Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Uganda) and other third world countries with less local political baggage and greater relevant military experience (e.g., South Africa, Zimbabwe, India, Pakistan, and Egypt).

- Concomitant, intensified pressures on the opposing parties to negotiate a political solution. Washington should stop calling for relaxed economic sanctions against the Burundi government in return for partial concessions. Further, the U.S. should offer to help monitor and publicize leakages of the embargo such as those now occurring through Rwanda. New conditions for a permanent lifting of sanctions should be established in accordance with the OAU secretary-general's statement calling for "genuinely constructive dialogue" in the requisite political negotiations.
- U.S. support to help establish and monitor an international arms embargo against Burundi's military government and to assist with interception of illegal arms flows into the region. The U.S. should also diplomatically pressure CNDD insurgents to limit military escalation and support a fair political solution. Before military supply lines to the insurgents were disrupted by fighting in Zaire in late 1996, the U.S. and other countries repeatedly failed to take steps to limit the arms flows. Restricting the arms pipeline is a necessary prerequisite for any negotiated solution to the Burundi conflict.

A comprehensive and enduring approach to the intertwined ethnic conflicts of the region will, of course, have to go well beyond these urgent priorities. Postwar Burundi and Rwanda will require creative social healing policies aimed both at defining a new political system based on democracy and powersharing rather than ethnicity and devising measures to deal with the prevailing culture of impunity. In Zaire, the decline of current ruler Mobutu Sese Seko will hopefully usher in a legitimate and public-spirited transitional government able to halt the slide toward national disintegration and further cross-border ethnic violence in the region as a whole.

Written by Steve Weissman

sources for more information

Organizations

Amnesty International
304 Pennsylvania Avenue SE
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Center for Preventive Action
Council on Foreign Relations
58 E. 68th Street
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Voice: (212) 734-0400
Fax: (212) 734-4967
Website: <http://www.carnegie.org>

InterAction
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Fax: (202) 667-8236
Email: ia@interaction.org
Website: <http://www.interaction.org>

Refugees International
21 Dupont Circle NW
Washington, DC 20036
Voice: (202) 828-0110
Fax: (202) 828-0819
Website: <http://www.refintl.org>

U.S. Committee for Refugees
1717 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Ste. 701
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Fax: (202) 347-3418
Website: <http://www.irsa-user.org/user/uscridx.htm>

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Publications:

Jean-Pierre Chretien, "Burundi: The Obsession with Genocide," *Current History* (May 1996, pp. 206-10).

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World Wide Web

International Crisis Group Burundi Project
<http://www.intl-crisis-group.org/projects/burundi/burundi.htm>

Sub-Saharan Africa Links Burundi Page
<http://www.quest-net.com/~ray/BURUNDI.HTM>

U.S. House of Representatives Internet Law Library: Burundi
<http://law.house.gov/256.html>

U.S. Institute of Peace: Conference on Burundi
<http://www.usip.org/grants/burundi/burundi.html>

Africa Policy Information Center
<http://www.igc.org/apic/index.shtml>

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