

Buyoya regime rejects compromise on reform of Burundi military

by Linda de Hoyos

Under the sponsorship of former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, the government of Burundi, led by Maj. Pierre Buyoya, who came to power in a military coup in July 1996, and opposition groups, have been holding regular talks in Arusha, Tanzania, with the hopes of bringing an end to the civil war in the east-central African country of 6 million people.

Since an attempted coup against the first elected President of Burundi, Melchior Ndadaye, in October 1993, Burundi has effectively been at war. Ndadaye was assassinated in the coup attempt, which was led by Buyoya. Ndadaye was not only the first elected President of Burundi; he was the first Hutu to become President. As in Rwanda, Burundi is composed of a majority Hutu population with a Tutsi minority elite. The military, composed almost totally of Tutsis and with an exclusively Tutsi officer corps, has dominated the country since independence and the 1962 murder of Prince Louis Rwagasore. Post-independence history has been a chronicle of the oppression of Hutus in the country, with mass slaughters by the military carried out against them in 1969, 1972, and 1988.

In the latest round of negotiations in Arusha in March, Burundi's military leader Buyoya categorically ruled out the possibility of any demobilization of the military or the inclusion of any Hutu armed groups in the army. Calling it "out of the question to bring in the rebel groups," Buyoya declared: "In this region, when you don't have a strong army, everybody can attack you and impose his law on you or colonize you," he said. The only possibility for changing the composition of the army, he said, is that if Hutus want to join the army's ranks, there is no law forbidding it. However, they would be entering at the bottom and be excluded from the officer ranks.

An oligarchical structure

The oligarchical structure of the Burundi military and its domination by a small clique of Tutsis from the Bururi region of Burundi has made the Burundi military a natural partner of the warlord force backed by British Commonwealth interests and centering around the figure of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. The Burundi military has been involved on the side of Uganda and Rwanda in both wars of invasion against Congo-Zaire, in 1996 and again in 1998. War is not the only joint venture. Salim Saleh, half-brother of Museveni, has announced that he will start a livestock operation in Burundi; a

Canadian company has also been awarded the contract for the mining of nickel in Burundi, which holds one of the world's largest deposits.

The National Council for the Defense of Democracy in Burundi (CNDD) is the primary opposition to the Burundi military, and one of the key negotiating partners at Arusha. The CNDD was organized by Leonard Nyangoma, who had first organized the Frodebu party with Ndadaye and led the organizing for the Frodebu vote in the elections of June 1993, which brought Ndadaye to power. After the 1993 coup, Nyangoma was forced into exile under threat of his life. In September 1994, the United Nations, with backing from London and Washington, organized an interim coalition government, bringing in the Tutsi-dominated Uprona party. But this "coalition" government rapidly became but the fig leaf for the international community's silence as the Tutsi military carried out a relentless campaign of terror in the country. Between October 1993 and the end of 1996, the Tutsi military carried out the murder of two Burundian Presidents, the assassination of 8 out of 16 provincial governors, the murder of 16 cabinet ministers, and 10 members of the National Assembly. More than 48 leaders of the Frodebu party were killed or forced into exile under threat of death. Tutsis who had rejected the oligarchical mentality of the Bururi-Tutsi clique were the first targets for elimination.

At the same time, as decried by then-U.S. Ambassador to Burundi Robert Krueger, the Burundi military was carrying out the systematic ethnic cleansing of the capital city, Bujumbura, and was slaughtering Hutu villagers wholesale.

It was this reign of terror that compelled Nyangoma and others to organize the Forces for the Defense of Democracy, and to take up arms against the military-dominated regime. The response of the Buyoya regime has been to forcibly relocate Hutu civilians into camps where they lack food, water, and sanitation. At the height of this policy, the Burundian camps held 850,000 people and produced the biggest typhoid epidemic seen since World War II, which killed many.

In the interview which follows, Nyangoma explains the goals of the CNDD, which was not organized along ethnic lines, but around a commitment to democracy. The Bururi clique, however, rejects democratic rule on principle, as its stance on its continued domination of the military makes clear, seeing it as a threat to its grip on power.