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THE BURUNDI AFFAIR

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Introduction
- II. Historical Background
 - (a) Rwanda-Urundi; 1899-1962
 - (b) Rwanda; 1955-1963
 - (c) Burundi; 1965-1971
- III. The 1972 Uprising
- IV. Underlying Causes: An Analysis
- V. Conclusory Remarks

I. INTRODUCTION

On April 29, 1972, the Republic of Burundi was the scene of one of the worst ethnic wars in modern African history. The complete story has yet fully to be told. In the wake of an attempted coup by the Hutu majority to dislodge the control of the nation from the Tutsi and the resultant counter-offensive by the Tutsi, 120,000 people were killed.

Burundi and its neighbor Rwanda, formerly part of the German and Belgian trust territories have similar histories and virtually the same population ratios; about 84% Hutu, a patient, hard-working irascible and short people, 15% Tutsi, a shrewd, tall and proud people, and 1% Twa, an uninhibited dwarflike people who are rarely seen.

In neighboring Rwanda the Hutus, in a successful coup in 1962, expelled the Tutsi minority and seized control of the government.

In Burundi, however, the dominant minority Tutsi have, in spite of attempted coups by the Hutu, been able to stay in power through control of the police, the military and other vital organizations of the Burundi government.

The undersigned, in preparing this report, examined all of the pertinent documents and newspaper clippings, and in addition, visited with the Burundi Ambassador to the United Nations.

The comments expressed herein are not necessarily those of the organizations to which the undersigned are attached, but are offered in the spirit of focusing public opinion not only on a "consistent pattern of gross violations of fundamental freedoms" but also on the need to provide social and economic aid to developing countries in the second state of decolonization, so that political liberty and freedom can develop uninhibited by social and political unrest or tribal conflict.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

(a) Rwanda-Urundi (1899-1962)

Burundi, along with neighboring Rwanda, became part of German East Africa in 1899 - at the zenith of colonial expansion on the African Continent.

In 1916 (during World War I) Belgian forces from the former Belgian Congo defeated the Germans and occupied Burundi and Rwanda.

In 1923, Burundi and Rwanda became the Belgian mandated territories known as Rwanda-Urundi and were administered as a single unit.

In 1946, the territories came under the United Nations Trusteeship, with Belgian administration. Limited self-government was initiated, which culminated in the attainment of full independence for Urundi in 1962 as the Kingdom of Burundi under King Mwambutsa IV.

Shortly thereafter, between 1963 and 1964, during a succession of short-lived governments, the monetary-customs union with "twin-sister" Rwanda was dissolved and Rwanda gained her independence from Belgium.

Both Rwanda and Urundi have similar ethnic compositions and similar histories - about 85% Hutu and 15% Tutsi.

They were both closely bound, economically and otherwise, to the Belgian Congo (now Zaire) and each were managed and administered during the colonial period by Belgian officials. Events in one never failed to have some serious repercussions on the other. In each of these countries there has been a long-standing history of violent rivalry between the two tribal groups.

(b) Rwanda (1955-1963)

In Rwanda, between 1955 and 1958, Tutsi extremists, viewing Belgian political reforms as a threat, repressed the Hutu movement and in fact murdered several Hutu leaders. In 1959, however, the Hutu struck back and in a bloody Hutu revolt overthrew the Tutsi minority. Tutsis, indeed, suffered very heavy casualties and it is reported that approximately 120,000 fled to Burundi and other neighboring countries.

In 1960, leaders of Hutu Emancipation Movement (PARMEHUTU) established a provisional government. In 1961, Belgium recognized the PARMEHUTU regime, but the United Nations, hoping to preserve the ethnic-economic union

of Burundi and Rwanda after independence, ruled it unlawful and ordered free elections.

These elections resulted in an overwhelming PARMEHUTU victory, and in 1962 a United Nations resolution ended the Belgian trusteeship and granted Rwanda full independence.

Nonetheless, and in an attempt to again regain power in Rwanda, there was in 1963 an abortive Tutsi invasion, which originated from Burundi with the collaboration of some Rwanda Tutsi elements. The result was a disaster for the Tutsi. In the massacre that followed as many as 12,000 Tutsis in Rwanda were killed. An intensified and renewed exodus of Tutsis from Rwanda began and the relationship between Burundi and Rwanda deteriorated accordingly.

It should be repeated that one can understand the factors contributing to hostilities within each of these countries and between these countries, when one bears in mind that

each country is controlled by the rival tribal ethnic group. Rwanda government is dominated by the Hutus and Burundi, despite the fact that the population is 85% Hutu, has a Tutsi dominated government.

(c) Burundi (1965-1971)

There were frequent challenges to the Tutsi control of the Burundi during this period. In 1965 Burundi Premier Pierre Ngendandumwe (Hutu) was assassinated and replaced by a Tutsi Premier Leopold Biha, who was seriously wounded in an attempted Hutu coup. As a result of this incident, it is reported as many as 76 Hutu leaders were executed.

Again in 1966, another Tutsi army officer Colonel Michel Micombero overthrew the monarchy and proclaimed a republic with himself as President. Many problems beset his government as both royalist Tutsis and traditional rival Hutus challenged his government from several fronts.

The tensions within the country heightened, as revealed in the 1969 uprisings, at which time 23 persons,

including one former government official and 19 military men were executed on charges of attempting a coup in September of 1969.

At the time of the Burundi affair in 1972, President Michel Micombero was still in power.

III. THE 1972 UPRISING

Besides the general unrest and political instability associated with the developing countries, three factors account for the 1972 uprising and violence in Burundi.

The first is, of course, continuing Hutu discontent as evidenced in two previous Hutu-led rebellions in 1965 and 1969. This basic struggle involved an attempt by the Hutu majority to overthrow the ruling Tutsi aristocracy, as the Hutus in neighboring Rwanda had done successfully in 1959 which eventually resulted in the establishment of a Hutu-controlled government in 1962. In Burundi in 1972 the attempted coup failed at a terrible price, particularly among the Hutus. Again it should be remembered the dominant Tutsi

in Burundi account for only 15 percent of the 3.5 million inhabitants of this country, which is approximately 10,750 square miles in area.

The second factor was a Royalist uprising against the Government of President Micombero. After approximately 6 years in power President Micombero had allowed the King to return from exile in West Germany after giving assurances for the monarch's safety.

Shortly after the King's return at the end of March 1962, the authorities announced the discovery of a royalist plot and King Ntare was placed under arrest.

The first early reports said that the King had been killed in the fighting which ensued when his supporters attempted to free him.

Later, however, President Micombero, himself, confirmed that the "monarchists and rebels acted together on the night of the rebellion and disclosed for the first time that the former King was immediately tried and executed on the

night of the attack." (New York Times - June 11, 1972).

There is also a third element which only the Government seems to emphasize and for which evidence is very scanty or non-existent. This involves the charges of 'invasion' of the Republic of Burundi by foreign elements collaborating with the local rebels. Burundi Ambassador Terence tried to compare this 'invasion' of his country to that carried out against the Republic of Guinea by Portugal. The country most suspected by Burundese is Rwanda. Another element associated with the 'invasion' and the uprising were the "Mulelists" followers of the late Congolese revolutionary who allegedly wanted to use Burundi as a base to attack the regime of President Mobutu

President Micombero asserted that "Martin Kasongo, a well-known Mulelist, had taken part in the Burundi uprising, had stolen four million francs at NYANZALAG and had disappeared." He equally reported that at Martyazo, in the Bururi region, the rebels set up a 'People's Republic', and remained for two weeks before they were routed out.

The Burundi government also reported that 4,600 rebels took part in a systematic slaughter of Tutsis in the South and that another group of 3,000 rebels attacked Bururi, the homeland of the President, and a fourth was said to have taken place at Kitego, where the former King was held. There were charges by the Burundi government that the Hutus were using mulelist tactics, were smoking hashish and said to have worn white saucepans stained with blood as helmets and to have had their bodies tattooed with magic signs as immunity against attack.

In all, the evidence seems to be that approximately 10,000 Hutus and a small number of mulelists did take part in the attempted coup which resulted in extreme repression by President Micombero.

IV. UNDERLYING CAUSES; AN ANALYSIS

The events which transpired in Burundi between the 29th of April, the months of May and early June of 1972 resulted in what might be fairly described as genocidal political violence resulting in a breakdown of law and order

throughout the country,

The explanation of what happened issued by the government of Burundi has been found by us to be contradictory and inconsistent.

For instance, the question of who killed the deposed King Ntare? The Burundi White Paper from The Burundi Mission to the U.N. of June 6, 1972, stated that the King had been killed during the fighting between the government forces and the rebels in the City of Kitega. In an interview with the Press (New York Times of June 11, 1972), President Micombero said that the Ex-King was "tried and executed on the night of the attack". The President added that the Ex-King was "duped by the Hutu plotters" who said the former king's name had been used to get as wide backing as possible for the uprising; that Ntare returned to Burundi from exile after he had been convinced that Micombero's government was "very unpopular and that it was now or never to make a comeback". Although the President acknowledged that he had given assurances that the former king would be protected on his return he stressed that, since he was "trying to trap me",

he could not be allowed to move about freely and had been put under house arrest.

The President claims that after the King's return from exile, preparations for the plot were intensified. It seems clear to us that the decision to try, judge and execute the Monarch-King Ntare was based on strategic reasoning. First the death of the king eliminated the danger of restoring the popular monarch either at that time or in the future. Secondly, it eliminated the collusion between Royalists composed of Tutsi and Hutu moderates on one hand and the Hutu rebels on the other, thereby avoiding fighting a battle on two fronts.

In other words the fragile coalition of Hutus and Tutsi moderate Royalists built around the person of the Monarchy collapsed when the news of his death was made public. With the Royalists thus isolated, the government of President Micombero moved to challenge the more dangerous Hutu rebel insurgents. The incredible majority of the casualties were Hutus. The Army, Police and militant youth organizations, under Tutsi control, savagely killed their fellow countrymen. According to some reports the Tutsis had waged

a deliberate campaign to wipe out the Hutu elite. Those slain are said to have included three Hutu Ministers in the Micombero Government, Parliamentary deputies, teachers, church leaders and even school children. The estimates of the total number of dead range between 50,000 to 80,000 (the official figure) to 100,000 to 150,000 (figures according to the Press).

Despite overwhelming evidence that the killing proceeded along ethnic lines and was aimed mainly at the Hutus, the government denied that there was any ethnic basis to the conflict. In what amounted to an incredible inconsistency the Official Government White Paper from the New York office of The Burundi Mission, on June 6, 1972 spoke of "Hutu attempted genocide against the Tutsi ethny". In attacking the Press for emphasizing tribalism in explaining the Burundi crisis, the White Paper asserted, "if tribalism is to be mentioned, think of the one you have dissipated into our society. You craftily took advantage of the naivety or cupidity of

of certain of our citizens. In a few years you destroyed the secular product of our ancestors. You distinguish between the Burundese citizens labeling them as Hutu and Tutsi. You did not stop there. You convinced Hutu of the necessity of massacring Tutsi.

All this with the best interests in mind, in the name of democracy! Oh! Democracy, how many crimes have been committed in your name; but providence is not democratic, nor is the massacre of the Tutsi minority by the Hutu majority which failed in 1960-1961, in 1965 and 1969, and finally again in 1972."

From the above one cannot help but conclude that the government has completed a full circle from first denying the ethnic origins of the conflict and then confirming its significant role in the 1972 upheaval in Burundi.

The attempted coup of April, 1972 to all appearances followed in the same line of prior Hutu rebellions, but this time was organized on a much broader and more violent scale. Whether the broad base and increased level

of violence can be attributed to the coincidence of the counter-uprising or reflects an increasing momentum and support which the Hutu rebels are receiving from both inside and outside the country, remains to be seen. It seems apparent to some Hutus that rebellion seems to have become the only way out. To the government of Micombero or that of any Tutsi leader, the readiness to crush such a rebellion, has been amply demonstrated in the more than five short "wars" since 1961.

V. CONCLUSORY REMARKS

We must realize that the Burundi case is not unique, and that democracy has not found a home in the world generally and in the new nations in particular. The incident in Burundi in 1972 involved an attempt to overthrow the Government of President Micombero. It involved a semi-organized group of the Hutu majority seeking a representation in the national government, and to some extent the Royalists bent on the restoration of the deposed popular Monarch Ntare.

The government response first took the form of self-defense, and then became an all-out military operation, in the South (NYANZ-LACRUMONGE) in the West (BUJUMBURA the capital) in the Center (KITEGA) and in the East (CANKUZA).

If genocide means "a denial of the right of existence of entire human groups" or "a systematic killing of a people based on their race or ethnic origin, creed or color" etc., then genocidal acts occurred in Burundi and the victims were mainly Hutus. This is not to say that the Hutus did not carry out some massacres of their own against the Tutsis. One Hutu member of the Government, Paschal Bubiriza, Minister of Telecommunication and the country's former Ambassador to Moscow, was said to have confessed that massacres had been aimed at the Tutsi.

In the end the Hutus suffered the most for it was the Tutsi controlled government which controlled the instruments of violence, the army, police, revolutionary youth brigades, etc. Hence, whereas the government can plead self-defense for moving against the rebels, it cannot at the

same time deny that a systematic massacre of Hutus occurred or that there was a systematic attempt to wipe out the Hutu elite, even if it may not have been part of the government's original plan to attempt to quell the rebellion.

It is difficult to argue to the contrary especially since massacre along ethnic lines has followed the history of Burundi since 1961 when Louis Rivagasore, son of the Watusi (Tutsi) king who became premier (designate), was assassinated only months before Burundi's independence. The succession of short-lived governments have followed successive massacres along ethnic lines of which the 1972 massacre was the worst so far in both its level of violence and duration.

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The International Community has an obligation to some of these new states, which in most cases they helped to create. It is probable that the tendency of the governments

of the new states to become authoritarian is not caused by hatred of democracy or democratic principles. In most cases there is neither an economic base nor a democratic political tradition. Most or all of them were products of colonial administrations which were anything but democratic, and whose preference for one ethnic group over the other depended upon to whom they could "safely" hand over power, upon independence.

If the Belgians had established a democracy in Burundi, perhaps the Hutu majority might have been in power or at the very least have been represented in the government and consequently represented in the nation's armed forces in a manner proportionate to their numbers.

These inequities in time become the basis of conflict and tensions at various levels with the resultant political instability. If the international community would help these new states to erect the proper basic social and economic institutions and hold those states accountable for

their international obligations regarding the people's human civil and political rights, it is possible that the excesses of those in power such as those related here, could be curtailed.

We have the Genocide Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and their respective Covenants, with which most governments hardly comply. When these international norms are violated openly by the new states, there is a certain leniency on the part of the international community. Helpless and hopeless victims rebel, and this applies to certain governments as well as to some insurgent groups. Some governments are victims of the tremendous demands of their people, which they cannot possibly fulfill with their limited resources and lack of technical skills. The people are sometimes victims because the narrow-minded leaders, who manage to get into power, turn away from their responsibility to the people to nurse self-serving ideologies, tribal or other narrow and selfish goals.

As UNESCO dictum says, "since war begins in the minds of men, it is there that the victory must be won".

The people need education for citizenship; education for technical skills. For example, the illiteracy rate in Burundi is 90% and life expectancy is 39 years. As we stated earlier this is not unique to Burundi, it is prevalent all over the Third World (in Afro-Asian countries particularly). At least there should be massive aid through the international organizations - WHO, ILO, UNESCO, and other specialized agencies to these countries to enable them to build the social and economic base required for the orderly functioning of a responsible government. Until this is done Human Rights will continue to look to them like a luxury which they cannot afford to dispense.

The UN has been involved in Burundi since 1946 when it inherited it from the League Mandate administered by Belgium to its full independence in 1962. The UN has provided substantial amounts for relief purposes in several

of Burundi's uprisings - through the office of the High Commissioner for Refugees in 1965. The UN also sent observer teams to Burundi during the 1972 upheaval to investigate cases of genocide, relief problems, etc., organized through the Office of the Secretary General. Burundi meanwhile has achieved another of its provisional cease-fires, but the solution to Burundi's problems remains as elusive as it has always been.

Unless these problems are solved escalating violence will reach a point where it may well sow the seeds of an international war most probably between Burundi and Rwanda. Anyone interested in the maintenance of international peace and security in that region cannot overlook or underestimate the "violence potentials" of both countries.

Hopefully, the legacies of colonialism will not be the tragedies of those peoples who were "trapped" in a situation of perpetual enslavement in the century that should be best remembered for its efforts on behalf of the African peoples' freedom and independence.

One cannot condone the use of force and violence to suppress the freedom and will of others. Nor can one condone the failure of the international community to help provide the social and economic institutions necessary to make democracy and freedom a realizable goal.

Respectfully submitted,

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