

# A UN Role in Burundi

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Strong declarations of international support for Burundi's legitimate president failed to stop a coup by that country's Tutsi-led armed forces on Thursday. Washington, the United Nations and others are right to continue protesting this violent takeover, which also overturns a hopeful power-sharing arrangement between Burundi's two main ethnic groups — President Sylvestre Ntibantunganya's Hutu majority and the Tutsi minority. But the main international priority at this moment is to avoid another bout of ethnic slaughter. The risk is real. Hutu soldiers and militias killed more than half a million Tutsi in Rwanda two years ago, and fighting between Hutu and Tutsi has killed at least 150,000 people in Burundi since 1993.

Burundi's last three presidents were Hutu, but the Tutsi have retained control of the armed forces. Many Tutsi have looked to the army to protect them from attack by Burundi's armed and violent Hutu militias. That concern is understandable, given the role of Hutu militias in the Rwanda slaughter and repeated episodes of Hutu mass violence against Tutsi in Burundi.

But the Hutu have good reason to distrust the Tutsi military. Burundi's first elected Hutu president was murdered in an abortive 1993 military coup. His successor was killed in a mysterious plane crash that also took the life of Rwanda's president. Now Mr. Ntibantunganya has been deposed by Tutsi soldiers and extremists.

For the past three years, authority was apportioned between a Hutu president and a Tutsi prime minister. But with suspicions running deep among both peoples and ethnic violence tak-

ing an increasing toll, the arrangement frayed. The president and the prime minister endorsed an appeal last month for foreign peacekeeping troops, but they were quickly repudiated by extremists in both camps. Each side imagined that foreigners would restrain its fighters, leaving its civilians vulnerable to deadly violence.

The final breakdown of civilian authority began last week when some 340 Tutsi were apparently massacred by Hutu militias. At their funeral, angry mourners attacked Mr. Ntibantunganya with stones. Fearing for his life, the president fled to the U.S. Embassy, and the army moved in.

Military leaders have handed the presidency to Pierre Buyoya, a Tutsi officer who ruled Burundi from 1987 to 1993. He is known as a moderate. His first term in the presidency also began with a military coup, but he went on to organize democratic elections and peacefully yielded power to a Hutu successor. He now promises to restore democracy again once the present ethnic tension calms down. That is encouraging, although it is hard to see how a military coup by the Tutsi minority is likely to produce much calm.

Diplomatic efforts to reverse the coup should continue. But averting genocide may require a United Nations military presence. Given the present level of distrust in Burundi, peacekeepers risk coming under fire from both sides. Still, the experience of Rwanda, where the United Nations failed to halt a bloodbath that many believe could have been checked, must not be repeated in Burundi. There is still time for the United Nations to act.

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