

Massacre in Rwanda

SUNDAY'S mass killing of Hutu men, women and children in the Kibeho refugee camp in south-west Rwanda is a stunning reminder of what a section of humanity must suffer when primitive tribal animosities explode into a recrudescence of violence and mayhem. This was the latest in a series of massacres which have been going on for weeks, with the Tutsi-dominated Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA) making indiscriminate use of automatic rifles, hand grenades and mortars to liquidate the nine refugee camps near the Burundi border occupied by members of the rival Hutu tribe. On Sunday, more than 8,000 Hutus were killed and another 650 wounded in a frenzy of mass slaughter. The casualties might have even been higher as the Kibeho camp had accommodated as many as 80,000 to 90,000 Hutu men, women and children. Large numbers of them had managed to flee to the Burundi border during the preceding night. Hundreds others were, however, trapped — only to be shot, macheted or crushed to death in the stampede that followed. There were chilling accounts of dead bodies piling up at the camp as the RPA troops and militiamen opened fire on unarmed men, women and children. Bulldozers had to be sent for to dig trenches for mass burials.

The Kibeho incident is a grim testimony to the apathy of the leading nations of the world community towards the plight and predicaments of backward societies caught up in the throes of a difficult transition from a colonial past to the demands of their newly acquired status as independent nations. Apart from the factor of delicate adjustment the process involves, the present ravaged state of Rwanda owes much of its troubles to the international community's failure to fully comprehend the grim reality of last year's inter-tribal warfare in Rwanda and Burundi when more than a million people had lost their lives within a matter of three months.

The plain fact is that the UN assistance mission (UNAMIR) based in the Rwandan capital Kigali did no more than merely express its concern when Tutsi-Rwanda tribal conflicts began to escalate again in early April and two sub-committees on Africa in the US Congress heard appeals for action to prevent a genocide in the Rwanda-Burundi region. A joint session

of the Senate and House of Representatives sub-committees was warned that the UN machinery was much too cumbersome and the region could not wait for the United Nations to go into action. The London-based Amnesty International also reported that ethnic extremists had placed Rwanda and Burundi on an inexorable course of tribal violence and reprisals. Amnesty particularly criticised the UN for what it deemed to be its slow pace to bring to justice the mainly Hutu suspects of war crimes of Rwanda's genocidal warfare last year.

The Human Rights Watch (a non-governmental organisation) of Washington accused the Rwandan authorities of holding some 30,000 detainees, mainly Hutus, picked up at the time of the present government's installation in July last and cramming the jails with prisoners. The UN representative to Rwanda, Shahryar Khan, maintained that 22 prisoners had died of suffocation in a Kigali prison cell which was meant to hold only 10 persons.

Surprisingly, despite the deteriorating situation in Rwanda, the Secretary-General of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) on return from a fact-finding mission to Burundi some time ago, ruled out any immediate intervention while conceding that it might be needed later if ethnic violence did not abate. There have also been reports of growing signs of anger and frustration in Rwanda at how the world community, in general, and the UN, in particular, have been slow in responding to last year's genocide and to its government's call for humanitarian assistance for the sufferers.

Clearly, there has to be a much stronger will and a more deeply felt sense of commitment to restoring a semblance of normality if the disastrous drift to armed anarchy and bloodbath is to be arrested. Considering the limited resources of the United Nations, some of the major powers, such as France and Britain, who have had links with the African nations in the past, could jointly initiate a strategy to help Rwanda and Burundi to overcome their tribal problems and work out a basis for reconciliation and peaceful co-existence. In such a process, South Africa's President, Dr Nelson Mandela, could perhaps play a very useful role if called upon to do so.