

Overnight violence takes Bujumbura into new general strike day

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BUJUMBURA, Feb 16 (AFP) - Overnight fighting in northern Bujumbura took Burundi's tense capital into the third day of a general strike called by the Tutsi-led opposition to press the prime minister to resign.

Witnesses reported armed clashes despite a curfew slapped on the city in December at the height of a political crisis among the Tutsis and majority Hutus, which has threatened to plunge the country into a bloodbath.

Grenade explosions were heard in the central working-class Mbuisa district, but no details of casualties were available as the strike took hold.

Prime Minister Anatole Kanyenkiko, a moderate Hutu who nevertheless came from the mainly Tutsi Union for National Progress (UPRONA) opposition, wrote Wednesday to the head of state and took "note that the consensus of opposition movement" was no longer behind him.

In a letter to President Sylvestre Ntibantunganya, broadcast on the national radio, Kanyenkiko asked him to have the opposition name one or more candidates to succeed him.

The chairman of the opposition grouping, Terence Nsanze, told AFP that he did not consider that Kanyenkiko's resignation was "effective" on the strength of the letter.

"We suspect a delaying tactic," said Nsanze, head of the Burundo-African Alliance for Salvation (ABAS). "So the strike will continue to force the prime minister really to resign."

Burundi, like the neighbouring central African nation Rwanda, has a history of strife between the formerly dominant Tutsis and the Hutus, which exploded into new mass bloodshed in October 1993.

Some 50,000 people are estimated to have died in massacres after a foiled coup by the Tutsi-led army in

which the country's first elected Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, was assassinated.

The government survived, but the small highland nation has teetered on the brink ever since. Kanyenkiko was appointed to head a power-sharing coalition formed after lengthy tractions late last year in a bid to stave off violence.

Nsanze said the opposition would meet on Thursday night to decide on a new candidate or candidates from the ranks of UPRONA, which has ended Kanyenkiko's membership, but he added that no names would be released "so long as the prime minister has not announced his effective resignation".

The crisis began in December when Kanyenkiko refused to bow to initial calls from UPRONA to pull out of the coalition government amid a row, later defused, over the choice of parliamentary speaker.

Bujumbura is currently hosting a three-day international conference

among concerned central African states, donor nations and non-governmental organisations on the problem of the 3.8 million people displaced or made refugees by the conflicts of the region.

The forum, jointly organised by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, began on Wednesday and is due to explore all aspects of the issue and produce a programme of action, according to participants.

The majority of the refugees and displaced people are Rwandans who fled the ethnic carnage that erupted in their country between April and July last year at a cost of between 500,000 and a million lives.

The conference is taking place at a hotel in the centre of the strike-bound city, under the watchful guard of Burundian troops who have sealed off the district.

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