

Belgian, French troops to Rwanda, civil war looms

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KIGALI, April 9 (Reuter) - France and Belgium sent troops to Rwanda on Saturday to prepare for an airlift of foreigners as the country lurched towards all-out civil war following two days of tribal bloodletting.

Rwandan rebel leader Paul Kagame rejected a new interim government in Kigali and said his forces would attack and take this central African country's rambling hillside capital, where relief workers say the death toll may already number thousands.

But Kigali itself, where parliament speaker Venat Sindikubwabo announced the formation of a stop-gap government, experienced its first sustained period of calm in three days in anticipation of the start of a U.N.-brokered ceasefire.

"We cannot accept the new president. He is among those who are linked to the murder of civilians in Kigali," Kagame said in a broadcast on rebel radio monitored in neighbouring Uganda.

"Anyone who attempts to stop them (rebel forces) is our enemy. We are moving on Kigali. Any government forces that want to join us are free to do so."

The bloodletting, which followed Wednesday's rocket attack killing of President Juvenal Habyarimana and his counterpart from neighbouring Burundi, pitted members of the majority Hutu tribe against the minority Tutsi, the former feudal overlords.

The Tutsi dominate Kagame's Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF).

Kigali residents reported the capital calm early on Saturday after sporadic overnight shooting.

One said dozens of corpses littered the streets alongside wounded people, who lay bleeding with no-one to attend to them.

"It was pathetic, really. Just death and lonely suffering. We've never seen anything like this before," the resident said.

Troops from the presidential guard, loyal to Habyarimana, a Hutu, patrolled the streets and many residents were barricaded in their own homes, fearing widespread killings.

"We've heard reports of a ceasefire, but no one is certain of anything here. I doubt it will hold," the resident said.

The officer commanding Belgian U.N. peacekeepers in Kigali spoke of fresh fighting. Asked earlier whether a ceasefire was holding, Colonel Luc Marchal

told Belgian radio : “Certainly not. The two sides are still fighting.”

Rwanda and Burundi have a bloody history of tribal rivalry. Tens of thousands of members of both tribes have died in recurring bouts of ethnic bloodletting.

Relief workers said Burundi, where up to 50,000 people died in violence following the October assassination of that country’s first democratically elected Hutu president, was calm.

Parliament speaker Sindikubwabo announced in a broadcast on state radio on Saturday he had taken over as interim president after consultations with other political groups.

Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, a Hutu serving in a four-party coalition with Habyarimana, was killed by soldiers on Thursday and three ministers were kidnapped.

Sindikubwabo, a Habyarimana ally, said his government only wanted to restore order and wanted to contact the RPF with a view to setting up a transitional government within six weeks.

RPF forces have fought fierce battles with the presidential guard over the last two days. They deployed 600 fighters in Kigali after talks began on setting up a transitional government under a peace accord reached in Tanzania last August.

Sindikubwabo named a six-member cabinet including Jean Kambanda as prime minister. Kambanda is from a faction of the splintered opposition Democratic and Republican Movement that is Hutu-dominated and which opposes any cooperation with the RPF.

Kagame said his troops had made an irreversible decision to fight a clique he identified as two political parties close to Habyarimana and to end days of anarchy.

Government and military sources in Brussels said Belgium was sending in paratroops to prepare for an airlift of foreigners from its former colony, where 10 Belgian U.N. peacekeepers were killed trying to save the slain prime minister.

“Some soldiers have already left, but the main contingent will leave later today,” said one source, who asked not to be identified.

“The idea was that we would go in after the French had secured the airport in Kigali,” said another source.

French troops, according to U.N. officials and diplomats in New York, arrived in Kigali one three planes earlier to secure the airport for a possible evacuation of some 600 French nationals. Belgium has 1,500 nationals in Rwanda.

France said on Saturday the decision to send soldiers had been taken “in the face of the spread and the worsening of the violence in Kigali”.

The diplomats said the French operation was designed to open the airport so that other countries, such as Belgium and the United States, could send evacuation planes.

The United Nations has a force of 2,500 troops in Rwanda, including more than 400 Belgians.

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