

Jubilant Rwandan rebels edge closer to capital

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KIGALI, April 13 (Reuter) - Jubilant Rwandan rebels edged closer to the bloodsoaked capital Kigali on Wednesday, chanting war songs and dancing to celebrate an imminent end to long years of exile.

But for the thousands fleeing fierce battles in the tiny central African state between government forces and rebels of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), life in exile had just began.

The entire cabinet, appointed last week after the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana and rejected by the rebels, fled to Gitarama, 40 km (25 miles) southwest of Kigali.

Habyarimana's death last Wednesday in a rocket attack on his plane sparked the current bout of centuries-old bloodletting between Hutus and the minority Tutsi.

The RPF said 2,400 of its men had surrounded Kigali.

At their bush headquarters at Mulindi in the hilly north, RPF officers were celebrating. They swigged from bottles of beer and danced as their frontline units hovered near the capital.

Rebel radio interrupted play of U.S. singer Tracy Chapman's hit "Talking about the Revolution" to announce that two major government garrison towns in the north - Nyagatare and Gabiro - had fallen to rebel forces.

The other major towns of Byumba, Mutara and Ruhengeri have been completely encircled by the rebels and the radio spoke of heavy casualties inflicted on government forces.

"In all these places, our forces inflicted heavy casualties on the government forces," the radio said.

For many in the RPF's 20,000-strong guerrilla army, the end to long years of exile life was in sight.

The rebels are mainly refugees of the Tutsi tribe, who lived in neighbouring countries before they launched their first invasion from Uganda in 1990.

A wave of Tutsi refugees left Rwanda after an uprising by the majority Hutus in 1959 ended Tutsi control of government. They subsequently joined the Ugandan army.

The RPF's founding leader, the late Major-General Fred Rwigyema was a close ally of Ugandan leader Yoweri Museveni. Like Museveni, he fought alongside Tanzanian troops who ended dictator Idi Amin's rule in Uganda.

Rwigyema led most of the present RPF fighters into joining Museveni to fight a bush war which brought Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) into power in 1986.

"It's nice to be back home. Exile was a tough life. Even in Uganda where we contributed with our blood to bring about peace, we were always reminded that we were exiles, simple mercenaries," one RPF fighter told Reuters.

As he spoke, his comrades danced to Chapman's tune blared out over rebel radio.

"Their spirits are high. Everyone is drinking," said Reuter journalist Aidan Hartley. "They are celebrating the imminent end of long years of exile."

But for thousands fleeing fighting into Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zaire, life in exile was just starting.

Journalists entering Kigali said they saw more than 100,000 refugees, apparently Hutus, fleeing the capital carrying a few belongings. Neighbouring countries reported receiving influxes of Rwandan refugees.

"The situation is very grave. It is...a humanitarian catastrophe," Philippe Gayard, chief delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Rwanda, told reporters.

Most foreigners have already left Rwanda. The French and Belgians, for long major players in the country's politics, closed down their embassies on Tuesday.

The rebels said they would storm Kigali soon after foreign troops evacuating Western and other nationals had left the capital.

"We shall then swiftly move to establish a transitional all-party government and heal the wounds of tribal hatred," a rebel official contacted in the Ugandan capital Kampala told Reuters.

Diplomats said the rebels were likely to ban political parties when they take power like their mentor Museveni.

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