

Belgian paratroopers in Kigali gunbattle

Smerdon, Peter

Reuters, April 13, 1994

KIGALI, April 13 (Reuter) - Belgian paratroopers came under fire in the Rwandan capital on Wednesday as they evacuated the last foreigners from the central African city ravaged by days of tribal bloodshed.

Witnesses said unidentified gunmen in the rundown district of Nyamirambo attacked a Belgian convoy searching for a handful of westerners still trapped in Kigali.

The Belgian troops returned fire before racing out across the area's potholed, sandy streets. No-one on the convoy was injured.

Nyamirambo was one of the areas of heavy fighting earlier in the day between infiltrating rebels of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) and regular army soldiers.

As night fell over the blood-soaked capital, gangs of frightened Hutu tribesmen, drunk on banana beer, erected more roadblocks across the city and threatened to kill anyone they did not know or recognise, including government soldiers.

"Mass hysteria is sweeping the town, they are sure the RPF will kill them. There is no control," said Reuter correspondent Peter Smerdon.

The Belgian contingent toured the city and picked up more than 40 expatriates, including 12 Americans and 15 Poles, and escorted them to the international airport on the edge of the rambling capital.

Residents said heavy fighting erupted at dawn, but died down again later in the day. Rwandan rebels exchanged artillery, mortar and cannon fire with government forces while thousands of refugees poured out of the city.

Army helicopter gunships pounded rebels advancing on the headquarters of the paramilitary gendarmarie at Kacyiru in the northeast of the capital, where thousands of people have died in tribal warfare since the president was killed last week.

"Much of the southern part of the city is under our control. In the north, we are still on the outskirts, but not in the city itself," RPF spokesman Wilson Rutayisire told Reuters.

He rejected reports of a ceasefire call from regular army units.

"How can we agree to that while they are still killing people?," he said.

He said fleeing troops of the Hutu-dominated army were killing people, mainly members of the minority Tutsi tribe, as they passed through the southern areas of Changugu, Butare, and Kibungo.

RPF forces have crept into the city from outlying districts to reinforce a 600-strong contingent, stranded in the city under a shattered peace accord.

Western troops still in the capital after organising an evacuation of hundreds of foreigners said government forces were demoralised and ill-disciplined and had little hope of repulsing the advance.

“The RPF are advancing, they infiltrate at night, particularly around dawn, fight with government troops and then move on. They are good infantry, they seem very well trained,” said Belgian paratroop commander Captain Christophe Onraet.

He said it was very difficult to say where the demarcation lines between rebel and government forces were, but said the RPF fighters appeared to have slipped through the city’s southern defence lines.

Captain Ronny Verneers, commander of 90 Belgian paratroopers at the French school – main assembly point for evacuees – said he expected to receive orders to pull back to the airport by Thursday morning.

Belgium wants all its nationals out of the battered capital before a deadline from advancing rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) runs out. But it was not clear if the ultimatum expires Wednesday or Thursday night.

The advancing rebels aim to take over a city bathed in the blood of thousands slaughtered in a tribal bloodbath sparked by last Wednesday’s killing of Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana.

Thousands of Rwandans were reported to be fleeing the country to neighbouring states. One journalist said she saw an eight-mile (13-km) river of people heading out of the capital.

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