

Fighting erupts in centre of Rwandan capital

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KIGALI, April 13 (Reuter) - Fierce fighting erupted in the centre of Rwanda's blood-soaked capital Kigali at dawn on Wednesday after rebels closed in under cover of darkness, witnesses said.

Fighting started at 5:50 a.m. local time (0350 GMT) with government forces and Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels battling with artillery, mortars, anti-aircraft tanks and recoilless cannon.

Witnesses said the Parliament building where a 600-strong rebel contingent was stationed under a shattered peace accord between the mostly Tutsi rebels and the Hutu-dominated government took several direct hits.

Rebel reinforcements apparently infiltrated overnight on Tuesday from just outside Kigali, awash in tribal bloodshed since the Hutu president was killed last Wednesday, and moved in on government positions at daybreak.

Army helicopter gunships pounded rebels advancing on the headquarters of the paramilitary gendarmerie at Kacyiru in the northeast of the capital.

As the rockets were unleashed, rebel positions peppered the sky with anti-aircraft fire.

Journalists staying in the downtown Hotel Mille Collines reported windows were shattered by the thud of heavy shells landing all around.

Red Cross officials said hospitals were flooded with casualties.

Thousands of Rwandans were reported to be fleeing the country to neighbouring states. One journalist said she saw an eight-mile river of people heading out of the capital, gripped by tribal bloodletting and renewed civil war.

Thousands have already fled into Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zaire.

The U.N. force in Rwanda (UNAMIR) reported the evacuation of foreign nationals was virtually complete and it has been possible to obtain safe-conduct passes from all the combatants.

The RPF, meanwhile, continued to refuse to negotiate with any other factions and the only remaining radio station operating in the city was urging action against foreigners, which the U.N. said was particularly unwelcome.

The entire Rwandan 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 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.

On Wednesday 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 "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.

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