

Rebels battle government forces in Rwanda capital

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KIGALI, April 13 (Reuter) - Rwandan rebels battled their way into central Kigali on Wednesday exchanging artillery, mortar and cannon fire with government forces while thousands of refugees poured out of the blood-drenched capital.

Rebels of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) crept into the city centre from outlying districts overnight on Tuesday and opened up with a barrage of heavy fire shortly before dawn.

"There is heavy fighting in the city but our forces are based mainly on the outskirts. Most of the strategic hills around the city are now controlled by our forces," RPF spokesman Wilson Rutayisire told Reuters.

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.

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

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 in the tribal clashes between the majority Hutus and the Tutsis, once the ruling elite of the former Belgian colony.

Ratayisire said some 3,000 rebels around the capital could handle the situation, but said other forces from the 20,000-strong rebel army would soon also be moved down.

"We are targetting military positions such as barracks, we are not firing into residential areas," he added.

Western troops still in the capital after organising an evacuation of hundreds of foreigners said government forces were demoralised and ill-disciplined and said they 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 the rebel and government forces were, but said the RPF fighters appeared to have slipped through the city’s southern defence lines.

They are fighting for control of a city soaked 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.

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 entire Rwandan cabinet, appointed last week after Habyarimana’s death and rejected by the rebels, has fled to Gitarama, 40 km (25 miles) southwest of Kigali.

On Wednesday at their bush headquarters at Mulindi in the hilly north, RPF officers celebrated the imminent end of long years of exile.

They swigged from bottles of beer and danced to music blaring over rebel radio.

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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