

Rwandan rebel chief says ethnicity not the issue

Hartley, Aidan

Reuters, April 13, 1994

MULINDI, Rwanda, April 13 (Reuter) - Alexis Kanyarengwe, Hutu chairman of the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), says he wants to end dictatorship and tribal bloodshed in his country racked by civil war.

"I am a Hutu - but this is not an ethnic war. It is a war against dictatorship," Kanyarengwe, 57, told Reuters in his headquarters at Mulindi in the northern hills of the central African country gripped by ethnic bloodshed that has killed tens of thousands of people.

Kanyarengwe, whose Tutsi-dominated RPF invaded in 1990 from neighbouring Uganda, may soon have a chance to show the world whether he can stop the tribal carnage.

His troops have advanced swiftly on Kigali, plunged into chaos when Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana was killed in a rocket attack on his plane last week, and are engaged in close combat with seemingly demoralised government troops.

Kanyarengwe, 57, is an oddity even among his own rebels. He comes from the majority Hutu people while most of the RPF's 20,000-strong fighters are drawn from the minority Tutsi tribe.

"He is soft spoken and doesn't like confrontation," said one RPF official of Kanyarengwe, a stocky man with a strong handshake who likes to wear a sporting jockey cap.

He is the political leader of a guerrilla movement which has fought on the battlefield and around the negotiating table for RPF aims.

These included the overthrow of Habyarimana and the right of tens of thousands of refugees exiled by four decades of tribal killing to return home.

Major-General Paul Kagame, a 36-year old Tutsi and former military intelligence chief in Uganda's army, commands the RPF forces.

The chairman was born in 1936, the son of a peasant farming family in the village of Gatonde in the northwest of the country, at that time under Belgian colonial rule.

He went to school at a White Father's seminary. In the year after a bloody Hutu uprising against the Tutsi monarchy which forced thousands to flee the country, Kanyarengwe enrolled in Rwanda's military academy in 1960.

Among the first cadets with Kanyarengwe was Habyarimana.

He attended further courses in Belgium and on independence in 1962 rose through the army ranks to become intelligence chief under President Gregwa

Kaibanda's government.

In 1973, he was involved in the military coup that brought Habyarimana to power and was made interior minister but fell out with Habyarimana in 1980 and fled into exile in Tanzania.

In 1987, when the nascent exiled Rwandan rebel movement adopted its name, the RPF, Kanyarengwe was made its vice-chairman.

He was elevated to the movement's chairmanship after guerrilla leader Major-General Fred Rwigyema was killed on the second day of the RPF invasion of Rwanda in October 1990.

A Roman Catholic widower with nine children and also grandchildren, Kanyarengwe challenges visitors to a game of chess at his house in Mulindi where grass lawns lead to a long-since empty swimming pool on this former government-owned tea estate.

Kanyarengwe refuses to reveal what his role will be in a government if the RPF take control of Rwanda.

(c) Reuters Limited 1994