

Rwandan army units, rebels hold ceasefire talks

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NAIROBI, April 16 (Reuter) - Representatives of the Rwandan army and rebel forces have held their first face-to-face meeting to explore terms for a ceasefire while fighting still raged for control of the capital Kigali, the U.N. said on Saturday.

The U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) said officers from the army and the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) met at a secret location after a week of ethnic bloodletting between the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi tribes.

"The meeting was arranged by the U.N. Secretary-General's special representative Jacques-Roger Booh Booh and held behind closed doors. It explored conditions for a total ceasefire," UNAMIR said in a statement sent to Reuters in Nairobi.

There was no immediate word whether the meeting made progress. The RPF, which draws its support mainly from Tutsis, has previously said it could not discuss an end to fighting with "a clique of murderers".

UNAMIR said the meeting was held on Friday but did not say whether Booh Booh, based in neighbouring Burundi, attended.

A French television station reported Kigali airport had fallen to RPF forces early on Saturday but the Belgian military and the UNAMIR office in New York denied that.

"The U.N., Belgian and French forces are still in control at the airport. Nothing has changed," said a UNAMIR spokesman.

In a radio broadcast, the RPF made an appeal for aid for thousands of Rwandans taking refuge in areas under its control.

"Thousands of people are now taking refuge in RPF-controlled areas and the RPF calls upon humanitarian organisations to provide emergency aid, especially food, shelter and medicine," the RPF rebel radio Muhabura said.

Overnight, fighting raged at key points of Kigali where thousands of people have died, but U.N. officials said that despite a week of fighting, neither the army nor the rebels seemed in control of the city.

About 3,600 rebels have infiltrated the city but government troops, including men of the presidential guard, were still resisting fiercely, UNAMIR officials said.

In New York on Friday, the Security Council said the main priority in Rwanda was establishing a ceasefire.

“Council members demand that the parties agree to an immediate ceasefire and return to the negotiating table,” said a statement by council President Colin Keating of New Zealand.

The U.N. made no decision on the future of the 2,500-strong UNAMIR, set up last year to help implement a peace pact signed last August in Tanzania aimed at ending a three-year civil war.

Belgium said it was withdrawing its 420-strong force from the U.N. team and said peacekeepers should leave Rwanda because of the “brutal rupture” in the peace and democracy process.

Ten Belgian U.N. peacekeepers were among the thousands of people butchered in a week of slaughter in Rwanda.

The largest remaining U.N. contingents are from Bangladesh, with about 940 soldiers, and Ghana, with some 840. About 20 other countries provide smaller numbers.

Fighting erupted with new intensity last week after Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana and President Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi were killed when their plane was hit by rockets as it landed at Kigali.

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