

Rwanda refugees shelled, U.N. forces may pull out

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KIGALI, April 19 (Reuter) - Rwandan army troops shelled Kigali's refugee-packed national stadium on Tuesday, killing nine people inside and an unknown number nearby, United Nations peacekeepers said.

U.N. officials said positions were hardening on both sides of the Rwandan conflict and, after nearly two weeks of unchecked bloodshed, the Security Council was likely to decide to withdraw all U.N. forces.

The army and the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front are battling for control of the capital, where the shooting down of the president's plane on April 6 touched off a tribal bloodbath.

Tens of thousands of Rwandans are believed to have died and up to two million have fled their homes.

"The situation appears to be getting worse rather than improving," Abdul Kabia, executive director of UNAMIR, the U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda, said on Tuesday.

"We are continuing to talk to both parties but our efforts have stalled and we're not getting anywhere," he told Reuters.

"We find that the positions of both parties are hardening. They are making more demands, which are not helpful to the peace process."

"We understand the (U.N.) Security Council will meet later today to take definite decisions on the future of UNAMIR. If they ask us to stay we will stay. If they ask us to go we will go."

Another official, who declined to be identified, said : "It appears likely that they will tell us to leave".

About 30 shells slammed into and around Amahoro Stadium where 4,000 refugees are trapped without food near the capital's worst battle zones.

UNAMIR peacekeepers reported nine refugees killed in the stadium, took 40 wounded to the King Faisal Hospital and said they were unable to reach nearby areas where more dead had been reported.

The bombardment, described by a U.N. official as "rapid and continuous" prevented UNAMIR and aid agencies from taking badly-needed food to the stadium.

UNAMIR said it protested strongly about the stadium killings to the Rwandan army chief, who appeared to have contacted the army battery responsible for the barrage because it stopped.

"Shelling is continuing across the city but at a slower pace," said an official at U.N. headquarters near the stadium.

The artillery exchanges between the RPF rebels and government forces defied a call by the U.N. representative to Rwanda for both sides to show willingness to end the bloodshed.

U.N.-brokered face-to-face talks between the government and RPF representatives in Kigali on Friday failed when both sides presented stiff conditions for starting peace negotiations.

Belgium's contingent to the 2,500-strong U.N. force, sent to Rwanda last year to aid implementation of a peace pact, was scheduled to withdraw fully from Tuesday, possibly by road to Tanzania.

Belgium decided to pull out its 420 troops from UNAMIR after 10 of its troops were killed while trying to guard the prime minister, a member of Rwanda's Tutsi minority, before she was killed by rampaging members of the Hutu-dominated armed forces.

Belgium has also called for a complete withdrawal of UNAMIR, which after the Belgian pullout will rely on much lighter-armed Ghanaian, Bangladeshi, Senegalese and Polish contingents.

UNAMIR said on Tuesday President Ali Hassan Mwinyi of Tanzania had called on both the Rwandese government and RPF to meet in Dar Es Salaam on April 23 to see if they could resume peace negotiations.

Tanzania last year brokered the Arusha peace accords to end three years of civil war. But they were shattered when President Juvenal Habyarimana died in a plane downed by a rocket near Kigali airport.

Aid workers said an estimate on Monday by a member of the fragile interim Rwandese government that nearly two weeks of violence displaced some two million Rwandese, more than 20 per cent of the total population, was possibly fairly accurate.

"It is very hard to say but two million may not be far off the mark," said an aid official. "They are everywhere you look."

"It is impossible to count accurately for now. At the Tanzanian border with Rwanda, for instance, they are being held back by local authorities. But Tutsis are swimming the river."

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