

Rebels and Rwandan government agree to peace talks

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NAIROBI, April 21 (Reuter) - Rwanda's warring rebels and government, locked in an orgy of ethnic killing, agreed to attend peace talks on Saturday in northern Tanzania, the neighbouring country's president said.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which said on Thursday it had rarely seen a human tragedy on the scale of massacres in Rwanda, urged U.N. peacekeepers to stay in the country, now bordering on famine.

Tanzania's President Hassan Ali Mwinyi said in a statement on Thursday that both sides would meet in the Tanzanian town of Arusha to focus on ending the bloodshed with a ceasefire and implementing accords signed last year.

The violence, in which the ICRC said hundreds of thousands of people may have died, was triggered by the killing of the Rwandan and Burundian presidents when their plane was shot down at Kigali airport as they were returning from peace talks in Tanzania on April 6.

In separate meetings on Wednesday, Mwinyi urged visiting Rwandan Interior Minister Faustin Munyazesa and a delegation of the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) to end hostilities.

Despite the failure of two weeks of U.N. efforts to broker a ceasefire or even a face-to-face meeting since last Friday, the U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) welcomed the talks as a positive step.

"Tanzania as a U.N. member and close neighbour of Rwanda and active initiator of the Arusha agreement has every right to convene such negotiations," said U.N. spokesman Mukhtar Gueye.

He avoided answering directly when asked whether the Arusha talks stood much chance of success where UNAMIR had failed.

"We can have talks in various locations as long as they are in the same direction - towards implementing the Arusha accords and arranging a ceasefire," he told Reuters by telephone from Kigali.

Diplomats said that although they prayed for a breakthrough in Arusha little appeared to have changed since the RPF told the United Nations last week it saw little reason to stop fighting when it appeared victory was within its grasp.

"Any initiative is welcome and both sides won't insult the president by refusing to turn up. But going to talks and reaching agreement are very different,"

said one envoy, adding it took 11 months to hammer out the original Arusha accords.

The RPF, dominated by Rwanda's Tutsi minority, has vowed to topple the interim government and force an end to massacres of Tutsis and sympathisers from the Hutu majority by hardline Hutu militiamen and troops.

U.N. officials in the embattled capital said they were awaiting word from New York later on Thursday on whether all remaining 1,600 U.N. troops should quit Rwanda until the killing stopped.

They said rebel and government forces had verbally agreed to protect refugees in case of a U.N. withdrawal. But officers said they expected only increased bloodshed if the peacekeepers left.

In Geneva, the ICRC, the largest aid agency still struggling to function in Rwanda, said it would be a mistake for the U.N. to reduce its operations.

The humanitarian agency said Rwanda was bordering on anarchy and there was a "definite risk of famine" in the central African country of seven million people, of which up to two million have been driven from their homes by hunger, battles and killings.

"It would be a mistake to scale down," Jean-Daniel Tauxe, ICRC delegate-general for Africa, told reporters when asked about a U.N. withdrawal. "There is a definite risk of famine."

The ICRC also said it was concerned over an increase in violence at Butare, in southern Rwanda, where an estimated 100,000 displaced people have massed near the closed border.

It said hundreds of thousands of people may have been killed but the exact number of massacre victims would never be known.

UNAMIR commanders said RPF fighters captured the key frontline town of Byumba on Tuesday and now held a large slice of northern Rwanda from Kidaho to Gabiro in the northeast.

"The RPF is advancing in the north and in Kigali," a U.N. commander said during clashes in the city, which is carved up into tiny fiefdoms ruled by mobs out to kill any strangers, including fleeing civilians.

Three hundred Belgian U.N. peacekeepers, including some who burned their blue berets in disgust at the U.N.'s inability to end the carnage and prevent the killing of 10 of their comrades, left Rwanda on Tuesday followed by 200 Ghanaians on Wednesday.

Belgium has pulled out of what was the 2,500-strong force sent to Rwanda to help implement the Arusha accords last year. Other units have since left to avoid being caught in crossfire.

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