

Rwandan rebels declare ceasefire but shun talks

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Reuters, April 23, 1994

ARUSHA, Tanzania, April 23 (Reuter) - Rwandan rebels declared on Saturday a unilateral ceasefire in their war with government forces following the deaths of an estimated 100,000 people in more than two weeks of fighting and ethnic slaughter.

But the rebels said they would not meet Rwandan government officials, who were heading for this northern Tanzania town for planned peace talks.

Announcing the ceasefire, which is to begin at midnight (2100 GMT) on Monday, Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) secretary-general Theogene Rudasingwa said : "The international community sees this as a way of stopping the massacres, so we have obliged."

The United States on Friday called on the warring sides to agree to an immediate ceasefire and said it was prepared to help efforts to arrange a political settlement of their dispute.

But Rudasingwa, the chief rebel delegate, doubted the government, which independent observers blame for most of the massacres, could fulfill its ceasefire conditions.

Explaining why the RPF would not sit down to negotiate with the government, Rudasingwa added :

"I had two aims in coming here. One was to talk with the secretary-general of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and to meet Tanzanian government officials to brief them on our ceasefire."

Talks scheduled to start at 6.00 pm local time (1600 GMT) did not convene.

Rudasingwa said he would leave Arusha on Sunday morning and that the RPF would wait to see if the government side could fulfill conditions of its ceasefire including the end of massacres and a return to the rule of law.

Human rights workers estimate that 100,000 people have been killed and two million people displaced in fighting since President Juvenal Habyarimana was killed in a rocket attack on his plane on April 6.

The RPF says it is in a position of strength after capturing a swath of the north and a substantial portion of the capital.

Aid workers say the killings were continuing in southern towns. It appeared most of the victims are from the Tutsi tribe, associated with the RPF, or supporters of opposition parties.

Government comment was not available on the ceasefire declaration, which was signed by RPF Chairman Colonel Alexis Kanyarengwe in rebel headquarters

in northern Rwanda. U.N. officials attending the talks had not been told of the RPF move.

Terms to the ceasefire included :

- control of killings by government forces in their areas of control within 96 hours of the ceasefire deadline
- monitoring of the ceasefire by 270 U.N. observers still in Rwanda following the cut in peacekeeping forces by the Security Council
- negotiations on implementation of the nine-month-old peace accord which was supposed to end the civil war and establish an all-party transitional government
- exclusion from peace talks of those linked to killings
- an international tribunal to investigate and punish those responsible for killing the president and carrying out massacres
- joint control of Kigali airport by rebels and government forces and creation of internationally supervised safe corridors for delivery of aid and safe passage of civilians.

Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Secretary-General Salim Ahmed Salim welcomed the news of the RPF ceasefire declaration.

“Much will depend on what happens on the ground but a ceasefire would be an important step towards ending the carnage and mayhem,” he told Reuters on arrival in Arusha.

On Friday Salim blasted the U.N. announcement that it was evacuating most of its 2,500 observers and troops from the Rwandan capital Kigali due to the resumption of fighting.

“When things get worse, when things become more miserable, it is incomprehensible to us that the U.N. presence should be reduced,” Salim said.

A U.N. spokesman in Kigali said 1,000 peacekeepers were due to leave the capital by Saturday night, leaving about 600 troops who would be reduced within days to 270.

But U.N. special envoy Jacques-Roger Booh-Booh said he had been given authority to hold back 1,000 mainly Ghanaian troops who had been evacuated to Nairobi to send back to Kigali if a ceasefire was reached.

“This is the last chance for the Rwandan people,” he said.

U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) spokesman Moctar Gueye told reporters the U.N. was deeply concerned about the safety of 12,000 Rwandan civilians under its protection who would be defenceless if they left.

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