

U.N. peacekeepers step up departure from Rwanda

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NAIROBI, April 23 (Reuter) - U.N. peacekeepers scrambled out of chaotic Rwanda where, amid the bloodshed, aid agencies struggled to get food and emergency medicines to thousands of people fleeing civil war.

A United Nations spokesman said 1,000 peacekeepers would leave the chaotic central African state by Saturday night.

Their departure leaves about 600 U.N. soldiers who will be reduced within days to the 270 mandated by the Security Council, a spokesman for the U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) told Reuters in Nairobi by telephone from Kigali.

Critics of the pullout, such as the Organisation of African Unity and humanitarian groups, say the U.N. is abandoning the thousands of Rwandans it was guarding around a country where tens of thousands have already been killed in ethnic slaughter.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said a medical convoy with 20 staff, including doctors and surgeons, had managed to get through to the embattled Rwandan capital of Kigali from Burundi late on Friday.

The convoy was to supply two hospitals in Kigali operating under the Red Cross emblem and another hospital near the town of Gitarama. The ICRC has around 45 international staff in Rwanda, two-thirds of them in the capital.

A U.N. team to evaluate Rwanda's humanitarian needs was expected to land in Kigali on Saturday where according to a military official small arms fire erupted early in the day but eased later.

The 10-member group is headed by undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs Peter Hansen, UNAMIR officials said.

The U.N. spokesman said the United Nations had sought guarantees from the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) and government army units that aid agencies would not be attacked.

He did not say whether the guarantees were given. But he had no word that emergency aid supplies had reached the city.

In Washington, the White House 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.

“We call on the Rwandan army and the Rwandan Patriotic Front to agree on an immediate ceasefire and return to negotiations called for and facilitated by the government of Tanzania,” a White House statement said on Friday.

It added that Washington was “prepared to participate, as in the past, in renewed negotiations in the context of the Arusha Agreement of August 4, 1993.” That agreement called for a negotiated settlement and power-sharing between rival groups.

U.N. special representative Jacques-Roger Booh Booh was heading the U.N. mediation team in the northern Tanzanian town of Arusha where the Rwandan foes were due to meet later on Saturday for peace talks.

The mass killings, mainly pitting the majority Hutu tribe against the minority Tutsi, started 17 days ago when a plane carrying the Rwandan and Burundian presidents was shot down by a rocket as they were about to land in Kigali.

At the United Nations in New York, a spokesman for Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said on Friday the U.N. chief would have preferred a beefed-up U.N. operation in Rwanda but realised the Security Council felt differently.

The council voted late on Thursday to cut the beleaguered force, once 2,500-strong, to about 270 to help negotiate a truce in the civil war.

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