

Mediators struggle to bring Rwanda talks to life

Hartley, Aidan

Reuters, April 24, 1994

ARUSHA, Tanzania, April 24 (Reuter) - Mediators struggled to bring Rwanda's warring parties together on Sunday but no government team arrived and a rebel envoy said he would not meet them if they came.

Asked whether the peace talks, which were originally due to open on Saturday, would take place in the northern Tanzanian town of Arusha, Tanzanian Foreign Minister Joseph Rwegasira told reporters :

"It's difficult to say at the moment. We'll keep on waiting."

The talks were called last week by Tanzania between the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) and government forces to end civil war and massacres since Rwanda's President Juvenal Habyarimana was killed in a rocket attack on his plane on April 6. The president of neighbouring Burundi died in the same attack.

The rebel RPF preempted the Arusha talks by saying it would observe a unilateral ceasefire from midnight (2200 GMT) on Monday.

RPF secretary-general Theogene Rudasingwa said he had no intention of meeting a government team and came to Arusha only to brief Organisation of African Unity Secretary-General Salim Ahmed Salim and Tanzanian officials.

"My mission was limited. Let that be very clear," he said.

The RPF does not recognise the government set up by survivors of Habyarimana's political party and blames it for the killing of countless thousands in tribal fighting which followed his death.

Officials and diplomats hung around the lobby of an Arusha hotel on Sunday, swapping rumours about the whereabouts of the government delegation. All normal telephone lines to the tiny central African nation are cut.

A three-man delegation was reported to have left the southwest Rwandan town of Gityrama, where the self-declared interim government fled when rebels attacked the capital Kigali.

Tanzanian officials said the team had crossed the Zairean border to Goma. But U.N. officials said a U.N. plane sent to Zaire to bring them to Arusha on Saturday night found no one.

Officials said Tanzanian Prime Minister John Malecela was trying to persuade Rudasingwa to stay and talk directly with the government delegation.

But Jacques-Roger Booh-Booh, U.N. special representative to Rwanda, said chances of getting talks off the ground were "one per cent".

The U.N. envoy said that as far as he was concerned there was no ceasefire - indicating his anger that the RPF had failed to inform the United Nations

officially of its move on Saturday.

Rwegisara welcomed the RPF declaration but added that he was disappointed the RPF was refusing to take part in direct talks.

“The meeting here was all about a ceasefire and a reversion to the Arusha peace process. We think this (the unilateral ceasefire) is a good development,” he told reporters. “Whenever the government arrives we will see what the response is.”

Tanzania sponsored 11 months of negotiations between the RPF and Randan government in Arusha which concluded last year with an agreement to end three years of civil war.

Rudasingwa said the ceasefire would take effect without conditions but would not be sustained unless terms were met including the ending of all killings by government forces and militias within 96 hours.

Human rights workers estimate 100,000 people have been killed and two million displaced this month – most opposition party supporters and members of Rwanda’s minority Tutsi clan.

(c) Reuters Limited 1994