

Rebel offensive blocks U.N. flights to Rwanda

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KIGALI, May 9 (Reuter) - Artillery and mortar bombardments hammered the eastern edges of the Rwandan capital of Kigali on Monday, stopping U.N. flights landing and blasting apart hopes of a ceasefire.

U.N. officers said fierce shelling erupted in the morning along the eastern front lines as Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels resumed an offensive on government forces holed up at the airport.

“There is shelling everywhere – very heavy mortar and artillery fire. It was impossible for our plane to land,” said U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) Executive Director Abdul Kabia.

“The situation is very tense. It appears that even if there ever was any ceasefire it is definitely not holding at all.”

He told Reuters at least one shell slammed into the airport tarmac but there were no casualties. A Canadian transport plane carrying U.N. troops and journalists was forced to return to Kenya’s capital Nairobi without landing at Kigali.

The airport is held jointly by UNAMIR and government troops, who have refused to withdraw.

The bombardments concentrated on RPF positions in a valley on the eastern outskirts of Kigali, the presidential palace and Kanombe camp, a fortified base for elite government troops.

The RPF, dominated by the minority Tutsi tribe, fought to Kigali during an orgy of tribal slaughter unleashed by the death of Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana and the Burundian president in a rocket attack on their plane at Kigali airport on April 6.

More than 200,000 people are estimated to have been killed in massacres, mostly of Tutsis by Hutu troops and militiamen, across the central African state since the killing of the Hutu president.

Rebels have advanced on Kigali’s Kanombe airport since last Wednesday, threatening to cut the only air link with the outside world for the 270-strong U.N. force and relief agencies in Rwanda.

Only one U.N. flight has landed at Kigali since Thursday.

Asked whether airport closures were making the position of the U.N. force untenable, Kabia said : “We don’t plan to go yet. We took precautions to ensure the security of our people at the airport.

"Our activities are extremely restricted. We are moving around a bit but we have suspended most operations," he added.

The RPF representative in Brussels said last Friday it had signed a ceasefire declaration in Zaire on Thursday that would come into effect at midnight on Sunday (2200 GMT on Sunday).

But RPF leaders have ruled out a ceasefire until massacres stop and has refused to negotiate with the Hutu interim government, which it has condemned as "a clique of killers".

U.N. officials had said they believed any ceasefire would be brief but had hoped it would allow peace negotiations to start.

The British charity Oxfam on Sunday accused the U.N. Security Council of dithering while thousands died daily in the world's bloodiest example of genocide since Cambodia's slaughter of the 1970s.

U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali has appealed for the formation of a strong international force to stop the slaughter but Western states have ruled out taking part and African states objected to being the only ones to contribute.

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