

Entire city flees the Rwandan rebels: Robert Block describes the desperate exodus from the crumbling government stronghold of Butare

Robert Block

The Independant, 4 juillet 1994

DRIVING into Butare yesterday was like entering Dante's Inferno. The hills echoed with explosions. Trenches were manned by wide-eyed soldiers with bows and arrows, spears and assault rifles. Tens of thousands of people – some on foot, balancing their weapons on their heads, some herding frightened livestock, others on bicycles so overloaded with personal possessions that they could barely ride them – filled the verges of the roads leading out of the city.

To the east an angry rebel army pressed ahead with its offensive. Yesterday afternoon it appeared that Rwanda's second city and the last big town exclusively in the hands of the extremist Hutu government was on the brink of falling to the rebel Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF). French soldiers expected the complete collapse of the city in a matter of hours.

'All the people have left the city,' said a government soldier standing in the deserted centre as a mortar exploded in the distance. 'The RPF is very near. You can hear their guns.'

The speed of the assault on Butare led to a daring French mission yesterday to evacuate 600 Rwandan orphans and displaced children, and 100 nuns and priests, including Europeans, Hutus and Tutsis, from the city. About 100 French soldiers, part of France's humanitarian force, sped into the city. In less than 90 minutes, five busloads of children were heading under French escort towards neighbouring Burundi and safety.

'We had a mission to evacuate a number of people who needed help and who were in danger from both the militia and the RPF,' said Colonel Didier Thi-

baut, the French commander of the rescue mission. 'My mission is not to fight the RPF and I received orders to get out quickly because we came under fire from the RPF.' It was the first time the French were engaged since crossing into Rwanda 12 days ago.

The offensive against Butare – which had a population of 30,000 and a thriving university before the war – began late on Friday. By Saturday, those lucky enough to own cars and trucks stacked them with their possessions and headed west towards Cyangugu, a government-controlled town on the Zairean border.

'I left yesterday (Saturday) afternoon,' said Bernard Mutwewingabo, a 48-year-old professor, standing by a car filled with his family. Asked if he was fleeing because of the fighting he replied: 'Not the fighting, because everyone knows that when the RPF passes they kill everybody.' Hutus in government-controlled areas say the RPF is killing Hutus in retribution for attacks on the minority Tutsi population.

If Butare were to fall it would make it easier for the rebels to move west toward government-held areas and the French intervention force bases.

As the French withdrew from the city, rebel soldiers were reported to have cut the road leading west towards the government-controlled third of the country. Desperate men begged rides from journalists and French troops as they left the city.

At one point a scuffle ensued between some soldiers. One man was shot dead metres from my car. The French said he was a government soldier captured by the RPF, Rwandans claimed he was a deserter. Whoever he was, he has joined the hundreds of thou-

sands killed in an ethnic war which shows no signs of ending.