

Convoy Peppered By Bullets As Rwanda Rebels Fire On UN

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THE shots were clearly aimed at us, and exploded in the dirt within feet of where we cowered.

Gunfire from 50-calibre machine-guns and anti-aircraft batteries on the hillside had broken up the six-vehicle United Nations convoy and suddenly I was sheltering in a ditch by the roadside with Bernard Kouchner, the former French humanitarian affairs minister, the UN press liaison officer, Mokhtar Gueye, four UN soldiers and two journalists.

The rebels clearly believed the UN was protecting government elements in the convoy which was returning to the capital after a meeting with leaders of Rwanda's self-appointed interim government in the town of Gitarama.

Calm but firm appeals by the convoy commander, Colonel Isoa Tikoca, for the UN headquarters to radio the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front base in Kigali to request a ceasefire were ignored for nearly an hour. Mr Gueye was almost hit as he crossed a small gap in the roadside wall to reach the Tunisian UN soldiers who had returned under heavy fire in one of two armoured personnel carriers to retrieve our group which had been stranded by the shooting.

The Tunisian commander, Major Belgacem M'farrej, ran out on to the road to open the door of the APC for Mr Kouchner and the others, none of whom had been injured, to get inside. As he did so a burst of gunfire echoed along the length of the steep-sided valley. Women in mud houses nearby fled along the road with loads on their heads, and were not fired on. A minibus carrying civilians sped past and machine-gun fire followed the vehicle along the road. After a few minutes' silence, two government army vehicles drove fast around the corner and a barrage of gunfire hit the road, the wall behind those trapped and the

valley side.

Without a final confirmation over the UN radio that the RPF command had ordered a ceasefire, the APC was able to edge close enough to the roadside to allow us to run to its far side and get in. The UN cars drove alongside the APC, which was then joined by another Tunisian APC drawing another hail of gunfire. The convoy slowly edged away from the scene of what is the first deliberate rebel attack on UN forces since the current explosion of violence.

No explanation has yet been received from the RPF, though it seems clear that the rebels realised that government troops were using the convoy as a cover to allow them to travel from the seat of government to the parts of Kigali under their control. The RPF capture of the road to Gitarama would cut the capital off from the rest of the country. Up to 4,000 government troops are now in Kigali, and are reliant on the road to Gitarama remaining open if the city falls to the RPF. RPF rebels had attacked the convoy at the same place, as it was going south to Gitarama for the meeting, and the government troops returned fire. As the returning convoy approached the outskirts of the capital, several government army cars pushed their way in, just before a steep pass. On that occasion a government army pickup with a mounted gun and five soldiers, which was to escort the convoy through roadblocks manned by the youth militias responsible for much of the violence, had returned fire.

Col Tikoca angrily criticised the breaking up of the convoy by the government troops, which included the man now seen by the UN as the most powerful within the military-controlled government, Colonel Theones Bagasora. Col Bagasora is alleged to be the mastermind of the violence which has left over 200,000 dead.

But Col Tikoca did not prevent the government troops from using the UN convoy as a cover to allow them to pass beneath the rebel guns. An hour after the attack rebel forces opened fire on the same UN and press personnel as they were driving from the UN headquarters to the UN-occupied Meridien hotel, which has marked the front line for several weeks.