

Rebels aim for Rwandan capital, northern front

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MULINDI, Rwanda, April 10 (Reuters) – Rwandan rebels advancing on Kigali said on Sunday they would impose order in the city and force government troops in the north to surrender.

A relief force of 4,000 Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels is trekking towards the capital to reinforce a 600-strong battalion pinned down by government troops, said an RPF official who asked not to be named.

He said fighting is also taking place on three fronts across the north of the tiny central African country, gripped by a frenzy of tribal slaughter which has killed tens of thousands of people since its president was killed in a rocket attack on his plane last week.

The 600 RPF rebels in the capital have been stationed there as part of a peace agreement signed last August which fell apart after President Juvenal Habyarimana was killed on Wednesday.

Setting off on a quick march on Friday, the relief force encountered heavy resistance from government troops around Buyoga, a village about 30 km (20 miles) north of Kigali, rebels said.

“The terrain is more of an obstacle than the fighting,” said the rebel official.

“The country is full of steep hills and swampy valleys and these boys are trying to avoid the roads where govern-

ment forces have their position.”

The guerrillas are carrying light weapons as well as heavier arms such as 81mm mortars which could cause devastating damage if used in the city, they said.

The RPF, whose ranks are dominated by the minority Tutsi tribe, has held back the rest of its forces – estimated at some 20,000 total – in the hilly north of the country.

Hours after RPF military commander Major-General Paul Kagame announced his forces would fight government troops and hardliners from the majority Hutu tribe earlier on Saturday, fighting erupted in the north, the RPF said.

Overnight, scores of rebels could be seen marching out of camp at Mulindi, the RPF headquarters. RPF officials said Kagame was in a bush base close to the front directing his troops.

The sky lit up again before dawn on Sunday near Mulindi as forces traded mortar bombs and machinegun fire. The RPF said it believed government forces in the northern trenches would probably surrender once they heard that the capital had been taken control of by the rebels.

Much of the north has been depopulated over the last year as civilians flee the war zone. But the RPF could encounter heavy resistance as

they move into the densely-populated farming areas further south, especially the southwestern area of Gisenyi, the home district of Habyarimana.