

Rebels, Rwandan forces fight in hilltop trenches

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MUKARANGE, Rwanda, April 9 (Reuters) – Rwandan guerrillas and government forces pounded each other with mortars from hilltop trenches on Saturday but rebels said their units were sneaking towards the capital Kigali at the same time.

“There are ways of going around defences to get to a place and leave the battlefield behind,” Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) Colonel Frank Mugambage said from the battlefield at Mukarange, some 70 km (40 miles) north of the capital Kigali.

“The idea is to get to Kigali... We can take care of the enemy left behind later.”

In Kigali, France is spearheading an international effort to evacuate foreigners from the battered capital. The first French citizens are expected to leave by air on Saturday night.

The rebels have advanced their main positions to within 35 km (20 miles) from the capital, RPF officers said.

But guerrillas moving on foot and avoiding government positions are nearing the outskirts of Kigali, they said.

Mortar bomb explosions and anti-aircraft fire – which the rivals use against infantry rather than planes – echoed around the steep valleys from before dawn for the first time since a peace accord to end Rwanda’s civil war

was signed last August.

The clashes erupted hours after RPF commander Major-General Paul Kagame said in a statement he had “irreversibly decided” to fight against government troops and hardliners from the majority Hutu tribe who have gone on a killing spree in Kigali since the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana on Wednesday.

Habyarimana and his counterpart from Burundi were killed when rockets hit their plane.

“Anyone standing in its (RPF) way will be considered an accomplice of the murderers and dealt with accordingly,” said the statement broadcast on rebel radio.

RPF vice-chairman Patrick Mazimhaka told reporters at rebel headquarters at Mulindi that guerrillas were moving on the capital to reinforce a beleaguered battalion of 600 rebels stationed in Kigali as part of the peace accord.

Saying they had been attacked by government forces in the last three days, Mazimhaka said : “We don’t want to be a sacrificial lamb, so we have a duty to go and reinforce that battalion in Kigali.”

Teenage rebels splashing through the muddy steep trenches capped their hands to their ears in Mukarange to hear the sound of a mortar being laun-

ched on the opposite hillside.

“He has launched one,” said a wide-eyed youth, ducking into an earth bunker on the side of the trench and then bursting into laughter as the mortar bomb exploded some way off.

With a tin hat cramped on his head and a cricifix around his neck, a rebel stood grinning as his comrade popped a bomb in the mortar tube and sent it whistling across the valley.

Rwandan civilians, most of them from the majority Hutu people, vanished from rebel-held areas when the hilly northern region became a battle zone after the RPF fighters invaded from neighbouring Uganda in October 1990.

Villages are deserted, lush undergrowth has flourished over derelict

houses and tea plantations that once won Rwanda export dollars have grown into unrully forests.

For nine months this frontline has been silent as the RPF and political party leaders in Kigali wrangled over how to implement a peace accord reached under pressure from the West and African countries.

Some rebel officers blame that pressure from the West for what they now see as an impossible political settlement for the current state of chaos in the tiny central African state.

“We had pressure from the international community and we obeyed. Now they can judge from these murders in Kigali what the result was,” said Colonel Charles Musitu.

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