

Rwanda's Tragedy Plays Out in War-Torn Capital

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Since the murder of its president on April 6, this tiny Central African country has been plunged into violence, fueled increasingly by ethnic rivalries. As the fighting rages, relief agencies do what they can to avert starvation.

KIGALI, RWANDA — A CROWD of Rwandans lining the muddy road are silent, stopping momentarily from their bloody work like children caught with their hands in the cookie jar. Armed with cudgels, machetes, and long knives, their handiwork is nearby : three corpses, bleeding in the dirt.

An hour later, as I pass by that spot with a group of Belgian evacuees, the number of those killed by the crowd has risen to 11. One Belgian woman peers over the edge of the truck and grimaces with fear : "Oh God," she gasps. "Is it like that everywhere?"

Such brutality among the lush hills of the central African nation of Rwanda - home to the famous mountain gorilla and formerly known as the "Switzerland of Africa" - is inescapable. No one is safe as Rwanda slides back to all-out civil war. Violence is random, lurking around corners on muddy trails and behind thick undergrowth.

Fighting has centered on gaining control of the Rwandan capital, Kigali. It continues despite United Nations attempts to arrange truce talks between rebels and government forces.

As senior commanders considered each others' conditions for peace over the weekend, rival sides fought noisy street battles along a shifting front line. Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels, mainly members of the minority Tutsi tribe, advanced last week from bases in the north toward Kigali's city center to "restore order."

This added to an already violent mix in the capital sparked by the death of Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana, whose plane was shot down nearly two weeks ago. UN officials believe that rocket attack was launched by Hutu extremists inside the elite Presidential Guard. The extremists were concerned that the president, a Hutu, was giving too much to the Tutsi in the implementation of peace accords signed last August.

Members of the Guard then rampaged through Kigali suburbs seeking opponents of the regime, battling with regular Army and gendarme forces. That slaughter revived latent rivalries between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes. People in the capital formed militia

units and gangs of looters along ethnic lines. They armed themselves with all manner of instruments of death, from screwdrivers to hand grenades.

The RPF rebels broke through a UN-monitored demilitarized zone north of Kigali to reinforce a battalion of 600 rebels billeted in the capital as part of now-forgotten peace accords signed last August. A rebel occupation of the city is almost certain to provoke a bloody backlash from Hutus, Rwandans and relief workers say.

The carnage already has taken tens of thousands of lives, according to relief workers, though International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegate Patrick Gasser admits that now the death toll is so high that the actual number of dead is "academic."

Ethnic conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi first became violent during Belgium's colonial rule. From the late 1950s to independence in 1962, colonial authorities sought to maintain control by playing the tribes off one another. The Belgians for years backed the better-educated Tutsi; but in 1959, as independence approached, they switched support to the majority Hutu.

More than 2,000 UN peacekeeping troops are in Rwanda to monitor the cease-fire, but the final pullout, expected yesterday, of 400 Belgian UN troops from the force - along with the logistic and military backbone they provide - has left the remaining units, mostly from Bangladesh and Ghana, apprehensive. But the UN mandate is so limited that they can do nothing to stop the slaughter.

"We can't do anything for the civilians. We must stay neutral," says Belgian UN 1st Lt. Oliver Carlens. "I've seen women and children massacred

there, in front of our compound, but we cannot intervene."

Canadian UN commander Gen. Romeo Dallaire admits that his troops have witnessed incredible massacres. The killers, he says, are "like demons in human form."

As rebels further infiltrate Kigali, the mood among mostly Hutu government soldiers and civilians at makeshift barricades turns ugly. Government radio Mille Collines, run by Hutu extremists, further fuels the Rwanda's style of "ethnic cleansing" by broadcasting messages summed up by one foreign listener this way: "A good Tutsi is a dead Tutsi."

Soldiers patrolling one set of back streets stop long enough for passersby to see a dead pregnant woman with a small child they just killed and left behind - along with the corpses of others soaked in fresh blood. A gang of youth and soldiers sit in the back of one pickup truck, and one boy of about 14 holds a heavy club, spiny with long nails. This lethal mace is covered in blood, but his young eyes hardly look like those of a murderer.

ICRC delegates have temporarily suspended collecting the wounded since a Red Cross ambulance was stopped at a checkpoint on April 14, and the six wounded inside were dragged out by the crowd and bayoneted to death. ICRC delegates broke down in tears after learning that 30 of their 120 local Rwandan staff had been killed in the past week, and that more were losing their lives each day.

Terrified screams could be heard at night from the hotel where most journalists stayed until a few days ago, only to be silenced after bursts of gunfire.

UN commander General Dallaire says that rebel tactics of advance and

withdraw in the city make the front line fluid and dangerous. Control of areas shifts depending on “sector and time of day,” he says.

REBEL forces number some 15,000, and are considered a relatively even match for the demoralized government force of 30,000 to 35,000 troops. The August peace accord, signed after three years of civil war, stipulated the formation of a joint Rwandan Army of 20,000 soldiers.

As the rival armies continue to battle instead, they considered conditions for truce. Government forces on Sunday broadcast truce conditions for the first time, though they are widely blamed by civilians for sparking the slaughter.

The Army “demanded an immediate halt to firing and military ope-

rations” and “punitive raids” by the RPF. They also want their security forces to patrol the capital to stem the bloodletting, though throughout the crisis, such units have moved at ease throughout Kigali, leaving in their wake a path of destruction.

The RPF say they have agreed to conducting joint patrols and the restoration of telecommunications services in the areas under their control.

Dallaire says that UN mediation attempts are still useful, though three cease-fires announced by the UN last week dissolved almost immediately. During a brief lull in the fighting, though, he told journalists that he was not entirely optimistic : “When people suffer so much, and in many cases have so little to lose, their instincts tend to come to the surface faster,” he said.