

Convoy Peppered By Bullets As Rwanda Rebels Fire On UN

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By Mark Huband in Kigali.

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.