

Three UN soldiers wounded in Rwanda

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NAIROBI, May 4 (AFP) – Three UN soldiers were wounded when Kigali airport was shelled by rebels locked in bitter fighting with government forces for control of Rwanda’s capital, a UN official said Wednesday.

Fighters of the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front were apparently responding to shelling of their headquarters by government forces who have set up artillery units around the airport.

The UN Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) has asked the government soldiers to withdraw the guns, but they have failed to do so, Abdul Kabia, UNAMIR’s executive director, told AFP by telephone from Kigali.

Kabia declined to specify the nationalities of the UN soldiers, wounded late Tuesday, until their next-of-kin had been informed. Two were evacuated to the Kenyan capital Nairobi but their condition was unknown.

The United Nations withdrew almost all its 2,500 peacekeepers from Rwanda last month after 10 Belgian soldiers were killed and the force had proven powerless to stop the slaughter of civilians. Only 270 UN soldiers are left in Kigali.

Kabia said the United Nations was still negotiating to take control of the airport. “It’s our only link with the outside world and our lifeline for supplies,” he said.

In another incident, seven Rwandans were wounded Tuesday by machete-wielding pro-government militiamen and government soldiers who attacked a UN convoy evacuating 62 civilians from a Kigali hotel in a government-held area.

The convoy was forced to turn back and the UN postponed a plan to evacuate about 300 civilians from

the minority Tutsi tribe that supports the rebels from the Mille Collines hotel on Tuesday, Kabia said.

The army, which had authorised the evacuation, said the UN had failed to evacuate civilians from the majority Hutu group from rebel-controlled areas as agreed with the military.

Violent explosions rocked Kigali as Kabia spoke. He said government forces were continuing to shell the old parliament building where the rebels have established their headquarters.

“The shelling is very heavy”, Kabia said.

Philippe Gaillard of the International Committee of Red Cross said the shelling was the worst since the death of president Juvenal Habyarimana in an alleged rocket attack on his plane last month plunged the tiny central African nation into a frenzy of bloodletting that has killed more than 100,000 people.

Late Tuesday, a shell hit the Sainte-Famille church in central Kigali where thousands of Rwandan civilians are sheltering from the fighting, injuring four people, Gaillard said.

Fifteen civilians were killed and 150 wounded when two mortar shells landed on the church on Sunday.

In the northern Tanzanian town of Arusha, the United Nations and the Tanzanian government failed to bring the rebels and government to the negotiating table.

Both sides sent high-level delegations, but the rebels have so far maintained their insistence that they will negotiate only with the army and not with the interim government proclaimed after Habyarimana’s death, which they do not recognise.

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