

500 bloated bodies attest carnage in Rwanda church

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RUKARA, Rwanda, April 26 (Reuters) – Bloated corpses of men, women and children, disfigured further by grenade, machete and bullet wounds, lay sprawled on Tuesday in a Rwandan church, its main doorway, classrooms and a nearby nuns' home.

We counted some 500 of them.

In this modest compound, overwhelmed with the sickly smell of death, they lay as grim witness both to pitiless civil war in this central African state and to the collapse of any services that could have helped the wounded.

For this massacre, one of countless in which 100,000 people have died in under three weeks according to aid workers, was carried out 19 days ago.

"We hid behind the altar where the grenades could not reach us," a frail survivor told visiting journalists.

Still trembling with emotion, Marie-Jose Usaba said Hutu militiamen hurled grenades inside the church at Rukara, 80 km (50 miles) northeast of the capital Kigali.

It was packed with hundreds of terrified people seeking sanctuary from the violence which had erupted the day before, sparked by the deaths of the Rwandan and Burundian presidents in a rocket attack on their plane.

Usaba, 48, told Reuters that mili-

tiamen known as "interhamwe", extremist members of Rwanda's Hutu majority, carried out the April 7 killings at the church.

"I reached the point where I wished a grenade would get us ...when suddenly a vehicle sped up to the church and people shouted out 'The RPF (Rwanda Patriotic Front) are coming' so the interhamwe fled before they finished us."

Patriotic Front rebels seized the area on April 13.

Usaba said the dead were members of Rwanda's Tutsi minority.

Several Hutus who were with them were removed peacefully from the church by militiamen before they started the slaughter by throwing grenades through the windows.

Survivors said two Spanish nuns appealed earlier to a local official to protect the Tutsis from the interhamwe but instead he cut the water supply to the complex to try to force them out.

The two nuns were forced to flee by militiamen.

During a tour of the almost one-third of Rwanda captured by the RPF in nearly three weeks of fighting, RPF fighters said interhamwe were responsible for most massacres and were a bigger problem than the army.

“The army is better than the interhamwe because a big section of it doesn’t approve of this mass killing. But the interhamwe were formed, trained and equipped to kill,” said RPF head of information, Wilson Litayasire.

Litayasire said he hoped a unilateral ceasefire declared by the RPF on Monday would be respected by government forces but if not the rebels would have to look to take over the government.

“We are not enthusiastic to capture the capital. We think they have already killed almost everybody there,” he added.

Rebels said large numbers of interhamwe had fled into the Akagera national park in the northeastern corner

of Rwanda bordering Tanzania so the RPF had sealed its perimeter.

In Karabanda, 20 km (12 miles) north of Rukara, a boy, 16, said he had taken shelter in the village church with some 2,000 refugees until interhamwe arrived and threw stones through the windows and allied gendarmes opened fire.

The dead, wounded and still living were taken out of the church and dumped in a large water storage pit nearby, he said. He stayed there for a week and was one of 11 survivors.

“When we meet interhamwe we kill them and we are going to keep killing them,” said Litayasire. “For them there will be no compromise.”

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