

Rwanda evacuation gathers pace

Smerdon, Peter

Reuters, April 10, 1994

KIGALI, April 10 (Reuter) - The rescue of foreigners caught in Rwanda's tribal mayhem gathered pace on Sunday with eight planeloads of fresh Belgian troops flying into the capital Kigali.

Shooting and the thump of mortar fire echoed occasionally around the city's misty hills in spite of a reported ceasefire between rebels and the army.

Red Cross workers believe that tens of thousands of civilians may have died since Wednesday, when President Juvenal Habyarimana was killed by a rocket attack on his plane.

His death launched the age-old strife between the Hutu majority and the Tutsi minority into a new orgy of slaughter in which the prime minister and several cabinet ministers, all Tutsis, were murdered, as were nuns, priests, aid workers and 10 Belgian soldiers serving with the United Nations.

The firing increased as darkness fell on Sunday, but was less intense than on previous nights.

"Either they have run out of ammunition, or they are getting drunk and preserving ammunition for the next round," a foreigner in the city said.

At Kigali central hospital 500 bodies spilled out of the morgue and were piled outside, one atop another. Men, women and children with bullet, axe and machete wounds waited for treatment.

Hutu youths searching for Tutsis checked documents at roadblocks, and foreigners escaping by road watched helplessly while Rwandan friends were dragged from their cars - almost certainly to their deaths.

Rebels of the Rwanda Patriotic Front - whose Tutsi kinfolk are the main victims of the Kigali bloodshed - were reported to have met strong resistance on a push towards the chaotic capital from their northern stronghold.

There was no confirmation from the rebels that they would observe a ceasefire with the army that the commander of a Belgium United Nations contingent reported at mid-morning.

Belgian officials in Brussels said in the early evening that eight planeloads of troops and equipments had landed at Kigali airport to rescue Belgian residents.

The 1,500 Belgians are Rwanda's largest Western community and the group in greatest danger because of hostility to the former colonial rulers and rumours among the Hutu that it was Belgians who shot down the president's plane.

Although France was able to land troops and fly out evacuees on Saturday and Sunday, Rwandan troops at the airport had barred the Belgians who began

landing after an agreement between Brussels and an interim government set up on Saturday.

Many of the country's other foreigners had already escaped. Most Americans took the road south to Burundi.

U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher told U.S. television : "As far as I know there are no Americans that are unsafe there".

(c) Reuters Limited 1994