

Battles rage in Kigali, massacres spread to countryside

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KIGALI, April 11 (Reuter) - Battles between rebels and government forces raged in Rwanda's bloodsoaked capital Kigali on Monday and tribal bloodletting in which thousands have been killed spread to the countryside.

The rain-drenched central African city reverberated to the thud of exploding artillery shells and mortars. Heavy machine-gun fire cackled through dirt streets.

It was the heaviest fighting since Saturday and seemed to be getting closer to government strongholds.

A French military commander, helping to evacuate several hundred trapped Westerners said rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) were on the edge of the capital, 2.5 kms (1-1/2 miles) from the French School in downtown Kigali, where trapped Westerners were assembling for evacuation.

A French convoy came under fire from unknown gunmen as it made its way from a downtown compound towards Kigali's international airport. French paratroopers returned fire. No-one on the convoy was injured.

As a fine drizzle settled over the lush, green hills surrounding Kigali, Belgian paratroopers began escorting several hundred of terrified Belgian resident to the airport.

In addition to 10 Belgian peacekeepers, six Belgian civilians have been killed in the violence.

To avoid some of the heaviest fighting on the main approach road to the airport, the convoys snaked through muddy sidestreets littered with bodies and echoing to the moans of the dead and wounded.

A woman, both her legs sliced off at the thigh but still alive, cried out for help. None came in a city where a five-day frenzy of tribal bloodletting showed no signs of abating.

Gangs of heavily-armed, drunken Hutu tribesmen hunted down and killed any members of the minority Tutsi tribe they could find.

In Kigali's main hospital, patients watched in horror as soldiers came in and bayoneted to death two Tutsi men, one injured.

Witnesses said such killings were common. Bodies were piled high in the hospital - some barely alive mixed among dozens of mutilated corpses.

Rwanda's history is written in blood, but the latest killing started after President Juvenal Habyarimana and his Burundi counterpart were killed in a

rocket attack on their plane last Wednesday.

His fiercely-loyal presidential guard unleashed a campaign of terror against all Tutsis, suspected of involvement in the murder.

The Tutsi-dominated RPF abandoned a precarious ceasefire and launched an offensive to rescue 600 of their best fighters pinned down in the capital where they were located as part of a now-collapsed regional peace accord.

RPF chairman Alexis Kanyarengwe told Reuters in rebel-held territory : “Our forces are advancing...government soldiers do not have the will to put up resistance so we shall know in days what the resolution is.”

Kanyarengwe, a 57-year-old former interior minister from Habyarimana’s government, said the RPF rejected an interim government set up in Kigali.

“They are just a screen for the killers. We do not accept their legitimacy,” he said.

U.N. sources said a shell hit a Kigali hospital late on Sunday, killing 27 people and injuring more than 100, in renewed fighting between Rwandan Patriotic Front rebels and government forces.

Reports said the bloodshed spread to the countryside.

Spanish missionary nuns in the western Rwandan town of Kibuye said the town’s hospital had been attacked and gangs were “killing all over the place”.

“They have already killed some of our patients,” she said. “We have just received general absolution, the parish priest came,” one nun told Spanish radio, monitored by the British Broadcasting Corporation in Nairobi.

She said the gangs, members of the majority Hutu tribe, had moved on to the parish church to kill terrified members of the minority Tutsi tribe who had taken sanctuary there.

“They are also killing refugees in the town hall,” she said.

Red Cross workers believe tens of thousands of civilians may have died in the violence. Those killed included the prime minister and several cabinet ministers, as well as African nuns, priests and aid workers.

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