

Cabinet and Westerners flee Kigali as rebels advance

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KIGALI, April 12 (Reuter) - The entire Rwandan cabinet and their army escorts piled into cars on Tuesday and fled Kigali while the radio urged civilians to support the armed forces in repelling rebels advancing on the blood-soaked capital.

Shortly after dawn, mortars and heavy artillery boomed around the steep, misty hills of the lush city in the remote heart of Africa.

Fighting was concentrated in the eastern suburbs of Gikondo and Nyamirambo, a former wealthy diplomatic suburb.

Army helicopters hovered low over the city and fired a salvo of at least five missiles at suspected rebel positions.

Witnesses said Rwanda's entire cabinet, appointed last week after the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana and rejected by the rebels, fled the embattled capital to Gitarama, 40 km (25 miles) southwest of Kigali.

Habyarimana's death last Wednesday in a rocket attack on his plane sparked the current bout of centuries-old bloodletting between Hutus and the minority Tutsi.

A receptionist at the city-centre Hotel des Diplomates, where the government was based, said all its members piled into a convoy, with a heavy escort of soldiers, and drove out of the city.

The Rwandan defence ministry issued a statement carried by Radio Rwanda urging Rwandans to cooperate with the armed forces against the rebels.

The statement, monitored by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), asked civilians "to act together, carry out patrols and fight the enemy". It said they should report rebel positions to the armed forces.

One lone soldier stood outside the Hotel des Diplomates, previously guarded by hundreds.

"I don't think the hotel will be functioning later today," said one diplomat.

Western military sources said Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) fighters, racing to reinforce a 600-strong contingent stranded in Kigali under a shattered peace agreement, were now only a few km (miles) away.

Captain Ronny Verneers, in charge of 80 Belgian paratroopers protecting the French school evacuation centre, told Reuters fighting was taking place nearby.

“We just had a lot of firing with mortars and light weapons from this hill,” he said pointing at a hill some 2,000 metres (yards) away.

“The army hasn’t a hope in hell,” replied a French military commander when asked if the army could hold back the rebels.

Representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) laid sandbags around its headquarters in the city centre and taped up windows to try and prevent flying glass.

The last few Westerners in the city scrambled to safety, many weeping for Rwandan friends and even relatives left behind.

“How would you feel if you were leaving your wife and you didn’t know where she was?” sobbed a middle-aged Italian man, cradling his Rwandese-Italian child.

The last French convoy left the French school with about 100 French paratroopers and 80 refugees of various nationalities, including 20 Rwandese nuns.

One U.N. truck was smeared in mud for camouflage, other aid agency vehicles had their doors torn off to give French troops inside a clearer field of vision.

The convoy included the last French diplomats who formally closed their country’s embassy. As the convoy snaked its way across the town to the international airport, Rwandese children scavenged through belongings left behind by the evacuees.

Residents said ill-disciplined gangs of soldiers and police, backed by armed members of the majority Hutu tribe, threw up more roadblocks on Tuesday and questioned all passers-by.

A Reuter vehicle forced to stop at one saw a fresh body lying mutilated at the side of the road. Nearby, a carload of presidential guards looked sullenly on.

The black-bereted presidential guard, fiercely-loyal to the murdered president, have been blamed for the deaths of thousands of people in six days of tribal slaughter.

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