

Rwanda atrocities go on, ceasefire talks stall

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BUJUMBURA, Burundi, April 17 (Reuter) - Rwandan soldiers raped and hacked to death civilians while battles with rebels raged for an 11th day in the capital Kigali after the breakdown of ceasefire talks, witnesses said on Sunday.

"It is like the mayhem has gathered pace. There are massacres all over the place. The army's delight is to murder civilians, while civilians turn on each other in ethnic revenge," said one witness, trapped in the capital Kigali.

He said in one incident soldiers tied the hands of civilians behind their backs and then butchered them with machetes, or just "emptied round after round as if on target practice".

"Sometimes people pleaded for their lives for 20-30 minutes, then the soldiers just shot them dead," he said. "Women are in trouble, they are raped first, then killed."

Savage fighting continued for control of strategic hilltops around the city. No one appeared to be in control of Kigali and army units and rebels fought with heavy artillery, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades, he said by telephone.

About 3,600 rebels had infiltrated the city but army units and the presidential guard were still resisting fiercely.

An interim Rwandan government official said ceasefire talks which began on Friday between rebels and army units had stalled over stringent conditions each party set ahead of negotiations.

"We are not talking just now," the official said.

The interim government has been rejected as "a clique of murderers" by the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF).

In neighbouring Bujumbura, Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira and two ministers who were killed with Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana in a rocket attack on their plane in Rwanda on April 6, were given a state burial on Saturday.

Their deaths sparked an orgy of ethnic violence in Rwanda between the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi tribes who have a long history of enmity. Thousands of people have died.

Belgium's 420 U.N. peacekeepers in Rwanda can start withdrawing overland with a convoy of about 150 vehicles on Tuesday, a Belgian armed forces spokesman said.

Ten Belgian U.N. peacekeepers were killed by government soldiers when the latest bloodbath exploded. Rwanda gained independence from Belgium in 1962.

Ghanaian soldiers would relieve the Belgians at Kigali airport, the Brussels spokesman said.

“The airport and certainly the runway could be seriously damaged, so quite a lot of troops could become trapped like rats in a net,” Foreign Minister Willy Claes said in Belgium.

A Rwandan officer of the Hutu dominated army accused unidentified Westerners and Uganda of aiding the mainly Tutsi rebels.

“There were two white bodies found when our forces killed 10 rebels in the north. We cannot explain this,” an official said.

Government conditions for a ceasefire included an immediate halt to fighting, setting up of patrols solely manned by state police, ending what it called “punitive expeditions” by rebels and “neutralisation of stray soldiers committing abuses”.

The RPF said it wanted the presidential guard which is blamed for much of the anarchy in Kigali and the countryside to be disbanded and joint rebel-government patrols launched.

The rebels also wanted the interim government dissolved so it could open talks with opposition groups on setting up an all-party transitional administration of national unity.

The RPF on Saturday appealed for international aid for thousands of refugees.

A U.N. spokesman said Rwandan refugees fleeing fighting in the capital and inter-tribal massacres were being blocked by government troops from crossing into Zaire.

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