

Rwandan ceasefire talks stall, killing rages on

Muvira, Deogratius

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BUJUMBURA, Burundi, April 17 (Reuter) - Rwandan soldiers, rebels and civilians engaged in frenzied killing on Sunday while a first attempt at arranging a ceasefire came to nothing, according to witnesses and officials.

"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.

Savage fighting continued for control of strategic hilltops around the city, he said by telephone.

No one appeared to be in control of Kigali and army units and rebels were fighting with heavy artillery, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades, he said.

About 3,600 rebels had infiltrated the city but army units and the presidential guard were still resisting fiercely after 11 days of conflict.

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

The U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) said there had been no further talks on Saturday and none were planned for Sunday as bloodletting continued.

"We are not talking just now," said an official from the interim government, which has been rejected as "a clique of murderers" by the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF).

The official was in neighbouring Bujumbura to attend the funeral of Burundi President Cyprien Ntaryamira and two ministers who together with Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana were killed in a rocket attack on their plane in Rwanda on April 6.

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

"No one knows what is going to happen," a official of the U.N. Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) said by telephone from the United Nations in New York.

On Saturday, a Belgian radio station reported the massacre of 20 people at the Zairean embassy in Kigali. A hotel employee in Kigali told the radio government soldiers, whose ranks are dominated by Hutus, had hunted members of the Tutsi tribe hiding there and butchered them.

An army officer accused unidentified Western nations and Uganda of aiding the mainly Tutsi rebels in their push for total control.

“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 made an appeal for international aid for thousands of refugees : “Thousands of people are now taking refuge in RPF-controlled areas and the RPF calls upon humanitarian organisations to provide emergency aid, especially food, shelter and medicine,” RPF radio Muhabura said.

A U.N. spokesman said Rwandan refugees fleeing fighting in the capital and inter-tribal massacres were trapped on the fringes of their central African country on Saturday.

The spokesman said Rwandan border guards had closed the frontier with Zaire, halting the flood of refugees fleeing ethnic reprisals. It was not known how many were blocked at the border but around 10,000 people had fled to Goma in Zaire.

Belgium said it was set for a fast withdrawal of its 420 United Nations peacekeepers from Rwanda, its former colony.

“The go-ahead has been given,” Foreign Minister Claes told a news conference on Saturday. He said all conditions, political and military, had been met for the peacekeepers’ departure.

“There is no time to waste,” Claes said.

He said about 100 people, mainly Europeans, were waiting at Kigali airport for evacuation.

The Security Council has not yet decided on the future of the 2,500-member UNAMIR, set up last year to help implement an agreement signed in Tanzania aimed at ending a three-year civil war.

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