

Terrified U.N. soldiers evacuate battle-torn Kigali

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KIGALI, April 20 (Reuter) - Terrified U.N. soldiers scrambled aboard planes evacuating Kigali on Wednesday as the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Rwanda neared total collapse amid bloody chaos.

Shouting at each other and mumbling prayers, 252 Bangladeshi peacekeepers squashed into planes loaded with dozens of U.N. military observers and refugees. Many, murmuring verses from the Koran, had to stand.

U.N. officers said they had been told the rest of a force once 2,500-strong would soon quit the central African country, ripped apart by civil war and tribal savagery.

They said the decision had been triggered by the refusal of government forces to hand the airport over to neutral U.N. control. Some 250 U.N. "blue helmets" would stay in a final attempt to broker an end to two weeks of bloodletting.

"If they (the warring parties) do not reach an agreement on a ceasefire it must be very clear we shall not stay here," U.N. special envoy to Rwanda Jacques-Roger Booh-Booh told Reuters late on Tuesday.

Booh-Booh declined to say what recommendations he had given to U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali on the future of the UNAMIR (U.N. Assistance in Rwanda) mission.

Asked whether the U.N. was prepared to abandon Rwanda, gripped by an orgy of ethnic killings since president Juvenal Habyarimana died in a plane crash on April 6, Booh-Booh said :

"We came to assist Rwanda, but we cannot impose any solution on the Rwandan people, who have to help us to help them".

Thousands of civilians who have taken refuge in hotels and others compounds protected by U.N. soldiers in downtown Kigali will be left defenceless if the peacekeepers go, say witnesses.

"Another round of bloodletting is inevitable," said one.

Rebels of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), sensing they are close to victory after more four years of bush war, are defiant.

"There are no negotiations," said RPF Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Kayonga at Kigali's bombed-out rebel headquarters.

The RPF now control parts of Kigali and has government forces besieged from strategic surrounding hills after taking the offensive after Habyarimana's death.

“The problem is not a ceasefire, the problem is ceasing the killing of people, the hacking, spearing and shooting to death of people,” said Kayonga.

As many as 100,000 people may have been killed in the past two weeks, the U.S.-based Human Rights Watch group said in a letter to the Security Council, made public late on Tuesday.

Aid agencies said on Tuesday unofficial estimates of as many as two million people made homeless were plausible.

Piles of stinking corpses litter the streets of Kigali and the hilly countryside, most of them butchered by government soldiers and machete-wielding Hutu militias for being from the minority Tutsi clan or supporting opposition parties.

Countless thousands of civilians can be seen trekking aimlessly about the countryside, trying to avoid battles between rebels and soldiers or marauding Hutu militias.

But in nearly every valley plumes of smoke rise from burning villages and the stench of death is everywhere.

“These people are behaving like animals,” said one disgusted U.N. military officer, but he added :

“If we pull out of here a lot of people will argue why should we stay in places like Bosnia.”

Belgium flew out the last of its U.N. troops on Tuesday after being holed up for days in the airport. Some disgusted soldiers burned their blue berets before leaving.

Brussels ordered its troops out after government soldiers tortured and murdered 10 Belgian peacekeepers, trying in vain to protect Prime Minister Agathe Unilingyimana.

Unilingyimana, a Hutu but strong critic of Habyarimana, was slain by rampaging members of the Hutu-dominated armed forces, fiercely loyal to the assassinated president. Several other anti-Habyarimana Hutus have also been murdered.

Reuters erroneously reported on Tuesday that Unilingyimana was a member of the minority Tutsi tribe.

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