

Heavy shelling in Rwandan capital

Mseteka, Buchizya

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NAIROBI, April 25 (Reuter) - Heavy shelling thundered across Rwanda's blood-soaked capital of Kigali on Monday and rebel forces evacuated hundreds of people hours before their promised unilateral ceasefire.

"Heavy shelling is continuing. Initially rebel positions were shelled and the rebels only returned fire," said Abdul Kabia, executive director of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR).

"But now the firing seems to be coming from rebel positions into the city," he told Reuters by telephone from Kigali.

He said Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels evacuated hundreds of displaced civilians from Kigali's Amahoro stadium, where they have been trapped for more than two weeks, to Byumba town in the north.

"They (displaced people) felt Kigali was unsafe and asked to be evacuated to Byumba. It was voluntary and all we (the United Nations) did was to monitor the evacuation," Kabia said.

An estimated 11,000 Rwandans were sheltering at the stadium. Aid agencies and the U.N. say as many as 100,000 people may have been slaughtered and two million displaced in the bloodbath this month.

The RPF, whose fighters control most of the north of the country and the northern approaches to the hilly central African capital, tightened their grip on Kigali before the ceasefire.

U.N. sources said the rebels had encircled the city's Hutu stronghold of Ruhengeri and controlled the main northern towns.

The RPF on Saturday announced a unilateral ceasefire from midnight (2200 GMT) on Monday. But it warned that if the ceasefire was to continue, government forces would have to stop massacres in areas they control within 96 hours.

A government team signed a ceasefire agreement from Sunday brokered by Zaire but the RPF did not and fighting continued.

Aid workers and U.N. officials are sceptical that the RPF ceasefire will hold for long amid the chaos and lawlessness.

"I don't know what will happen after midnight," said Kabia. "But I am hopeful maybe we will have a peaceful night."

On Sunday, the medical charity Medecins sans Frontieres said troops and gunmen killed up to 150 patients from a hospital in southern Rwanda because they were members of the Tutsi minority.

The United Nations says that adding to the horrors, a health disaster is imminent.

In Kigali “there is literally nothing by way of medication, no water, no sanitation facilities, no materials to build latrines,” said Peter Hansen, U.N. undersecretary for humanitarian affairs.

Hansen, who had just returned from the Rwandan capital, appealed for an emergency \$11.68 million as a preliminary step.

He told reporters in Nairobi : “In Kigali, there are decomposing bodies being eaten by dogs, rats, birds...”

Theogene Rudasingwa, RPF secretary-general said 8,000 soldiers were scattered over the past two weeks in the north, where government forces were concentrated, leaving behind arms and ammunition.

The rebels, mostly Tutsis, say the Hutu-dominated army has slaughtered thousands of people since the Hutu presidents of Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi were killed in a plane hit by a rocket on April 6.

Independent sources say most of the killings were the work of the presidential guard, fiercely loyal to slain president Juvenal Habyarimana, and renegade army units and extremist Hutu militias.

Fears that violence would spread to neighbouring Burundi, where simmering Hutu-Tutsi rivalry has so far been held in check, grew on Monday when paratroopers made a coup attempt. It was foiled.

Burundian Army Chief of Staff Colonel Jean Bikomagu said loyalist troops refused to join the coup plotters out of fear an overthrow would trigger a tribal slaughter like Rwanda’s.

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