

Heavy shelling reported around Rwandan capital

Clayton, Jonathan

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NAIROBI, April 25 (Reuter) - Heavy shelling echoed round Rwanda's blood-soaked hills on Monday with rebel forces battling government units blamed for one of the worst mass killings of innocent civilians this century.

"I don't know from which direction it is coming, but it is heavy and intermittent," Abdul Kabia, executive director of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda, told Reuters.

Kabia said Monday's fighting followed a "heavy exchange of fire on Sunday night".

Every day brings news of more massacres.

Aid agencies and the U.N. say as many as 100,000 people may have been slaughtered and two million displaced in this month's Rwandan bloodbath.

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

Earlier, journalists in rebel-controlled territory just south of Kigali came across a pile of 100 rotting corpses in Nyanza district and more bodies spilling out of mud huts.

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

In the capital 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 has 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..."

Rebels of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), who control most of the north of the country and the northern approaches to the hilly central African capital, tightened their grip on Kigali before a promised ceasefire.

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

The RPF this weekend announced a unilateral ceasefire from midnight (2200 GMT) Monday.

Theogene Rudasingwa, RPF secretary-general said 8,000 soldiers had been scattered in the north, where government forces had been concentrated, over

the last two weeks.

“They left in disarray after trying to join their units in Kigali and left behind huge quantities of weapons and ammunition,” he said.

A government team later announced a separate ceasefire for midday (1000 GMT) Monday, but such is the lawlessness and chaos that aid workers and U.N. sources expect neither to hold.

The rebels, mostly from the minority Tutsi tribe, say the Hutu-dominated army has slaughtered thousands of people since the Hutu presidents of Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi died in an aircraft hit by rocket fire on April 6.

Independent sources say most of the killings have been carried out by units of the presidential guard, fiercely loyal to slain president Juvenal Habyarimana, and by renegade army units and extremist Hutu militias.

“The entire anti-Habyarimana Hutu opposition has been killed in addition to thousands of fleeing Tutsi refugees,” said one RPF source.

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

Army chief of staff Colonel Jean Bikomagu said several soldiers refused to join in out of fear it would trigger a tribal bloodbath, like the one in Rwanda.

“A group of soldiers from a barracks in Bujumbura planned a putsch but they were stopped by loyalists when they left their post to execute their plans overnight,” Bikomagu said.

“Several soldiers have been arrested and the military command is interrogating them to find out why they wanted a military takeover.”

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