

A Rwandan Church Becomes a Fortress

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KIGALI, RWANDA — HOPE for an end to Rwanda's political and ethnic slaughter is strongest in the Holy Family Cathedral in central Kigali, where more than 5,000 refugees have sought sanctuary from the violence that has plagued their Central African nation for nearly two weeks.

Workers of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) recently made their first food distribution in Kigali here. They fed both starving people on the streets near the cathedral, from the majority Hutu tribe, and those hiding inside, who are a mixture of Hutu and the minority Tutsi. Until the food was distributed, survivors of the bloodshed shaking this capital ate only what they could loot and drank bottled beer and soft drinks.

The ICRC says it has enough food in its stores for 1 million people for two weeks. Some of it - sacks of maize donated by the European Union - is being used as sandbags to fortify ICRC headquarters.

Outside the Holy Family Cathedral, within sight of some of the thousands of bodies scattered about the streets, Hutus line up for their share of beans. They carried lengths of pipe, machetes, broadswords, and even bicycle handlebars for self-protection, but their weapons are as easily turned to offensive use.

The people in the food line, however, are docile and very hungry : The violence of previous days that has left tens of thousands dead in Kigali is hardly evident.

Taking advantage of a lull in the fighting between Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels and government forces that raged for eight hours in the morning, the ICRC distributes 10 tons of food for 1,000 outside the church, with the help of a local official and a handful of soldiers. "It's a kind of prevention," says an ICRC delegate who asked not to be named. "Starvation here will cause even more problems."

Inside the cathedral compound, protected only by high walls and, they hope, their prayers, the 5,000 people of both tribes receive 30 tons of food and cooking oil. Many have not eaten for days. Camped under pictures depicting the Stations of the Cross, these Rwandans read the Bible, play, and sleep, hoping that their nightmare will soon end.

One desperate man - unshaven and with fear in his voice - knows well that other religious missions have already been violated by soldiers, in some cases leaving as many as 1,200 people dead in a single massacre.

"This is the House of God, but we are afraid of attack," he says. "The Army has positions above us, and the

rebels below. We may die of hunger, but please not by knives and bullets.”

Refugees crowd around the man - their feet muddy from the trampled grass of the cathedral compound, eyes red from the smoke of cooking fires - as he describes their predicament. “We have no food, no water, and no medicine,” he says.

“You must speak for peace here, you must call the rebels and tell them not to attack here,” he continues.

Another refugee, a Tutsi called Faustin, says he was fortunate to arrive at the cathedral with his family because “Many people had been killed along the way - we were so afraid.”

A Belgian nun at the cathedral who missed the last evacuation convoy also knows the risks for those in the compound unless a cease-fire can be arranged. The Rwandans “cannot come out. It is not possible,” she says. “Everyone there is killing. They even killed a little boy and left him at our gate here. Now I fear that the soldiers will come.”

As rebels tighten their noose around Kigali, the situation on any stretch of tree-lined road changes by the minute here. Soldiers are replaced by civilian-clothed men with assault rifles, Uzi submachine guns, and gre-

nades. Bodies appear and disappear, and fresh ones appear again with disconcerting, horrific regularity.

Prisoners wearing pink tunics move through the city loading dumpsters with the dead. The stench of the dying often dissipates under the daily rains, but the enormity of Rwanda’s tragedy is unmistakable. According to the ICRC, at least two mass graves have already been set up on the outskirts of Kigali. At one, meant for 8,000 mutilated cadavers, corpses are moved around on the tines of Caterpillar tractors.

The rebel arrival in the city has sparked an exodus of more than 100,000 mostly Hutu people from Kigali, who are walking in a five-mile-long column to the south.

Among the last foreigners collected by a special patrol of Belgian soldiers on the day of the ICRC food distribution were the two Belgian nuns from the Holy Family cathedral. The 5,000 refugees inside watched painfully as the foreigners left them, possibly one of the few remaining deterrents to attack by soldiers from either side. Their safety now depends on the high walls of the compound - and their faith.