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Hundreds die as tribal violence sweeps Rwanda: 11 Belgian troops killed after downing of presidents' aircraft

By THADDEE NSENGIYAREMYE of Reuter, in Kigali

HUNDREDS of people were feared killed in Rwanda last night, including the Prime Minister and 11 Belgian United Nations soldiers, when troops and presidential guards went on the rampage after the apparent double assassination of the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi.

Members of the security forces and gangs of youths wielding machetes, knives and clubs rampaged through the capital, Kigali, settling tribal scores by hacking and clubbing people to death or shooting them. A group of rebels, camped outside the city under an earlier peace agreement, later joined in the fray.

A spokesman for the UN mission in Kigali, Moctar Gueye, said the Belgian UN soldiers were found dead after they were kidnapped by members of the Rwandan presidential guard. Three other Belgian military observers earlier reported dead by the UN were safe. The 11 were attempting to reach the site of Wednesday's plane crash near Kigali airport in which the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi were killed.

The Rwandan Foreign Ministry originally announced that a rocket had brought down the aircraft returning the two presidents from regional peace talks, killing everyone on board. In an attempt to restore calm, the Burundian government later claimed that the plane had crashed by accident but UN officials appeared convinced earlier that a missile had been fired.

Although Kigali was said to be calmer last night, and little violence was reported in neighbouring Burundi, continuing tribal slaughter between the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority in the central African states was feared. 'It is a terrible catastrophe for both countries at this very dangerous time,' a Western diplomat in Bujumbura, the Burundi capital, said. 'Anything could happen.'

Both the dead presidents - Juvenal Habyarimana, 57, of Rwanda and Cyprien Ntaryamira, 38, of Burundi - were Hutus. President Ntaryamira's predecessor was murdered by Tutsi last October, leading to another outbreak of the ethnic slaughter which has disfigured both nations since independence from Belgium in 1962.

Rwanda's Prime Minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, interviewed by Radio France Internationale, said yesterday morning: 'There is shooting, people are being terrorised . . . the international community must act.' Hours later Mrs Uwilingiyimana, one of Africa's first woman premiers, was killed.

'It is becoming messier. There are a lot of people with a lot of guns taking different orders and shooting and detaining people,' said a diplomat in Kigali. 'A casualty toll is impossible. The fighting is going all over the city. Mostly with rifles and pistols but we have also heard mortar bombs.'

Later in the day, rebels of the Tutsi-dominated Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), camped in the capital's

hilltop parliament compound under a peace accord last August to end the civil war, joined the fray, firing mortars and assault rifles. 'The RPF are engaging in direct fighting with government forces,' a UN official said.

However the RPF rebels denied any involvement in the attack on the presidential aircraft. A government statement said two Burundi ministers, five senior Rwandan officials, including the army chief of staff, and the French crew of the presidential jet also died in the crash.

The remnants of Burundi's government appealed for calm and diplomats there said that country remained largely peaceful.

Tens of thousands of Tutsi and Hutu have died in ethnic slaughter in both countries over the years. The death toll in Burundi since renegade troops killed its first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, on 21 October, was estimated at up to 50,000.

The Belgian government called for additional powers for the small UN observer force already in the two countries, but stopped short of calling for a direct UN intervention.

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