

Rwandan Rebels Prepare Last Push.

Catherine Bond

The Times, April 14, 1994

By Catherine Bond in Kigali and Eve-Ann Prentice, Diplomatic Correspondent.

REBEL forces of the Rwandan Patriotic Front fought their way closer to the capital, Kigali, yesterday after rejecting an offer by the country's army chief of staff to enter into negotiations.

Artillery and smallarms fire resounded in the capital in the evening after a lull in the afternoon as the rebels appeared to be consolidating their positions in preparation for fresh attacks. In his appeal for negotiations, broadcast to the rebels on state radio, the army chief of staff, who ranks number three in the 40,000-strong armed forces, said Rwandans had suffered enough since the death of President Habyarimana. He was killed with the President of neighbouring Burundi when the aircraft they were travelling in was shot down last week as it approached the capital.

The broadcast said that people were dying of hunger in their homes because of the conflict. In response, the rebels' radio station broadcast that as long as the army continued to kill civilians, they would continue to fight.

As the prospect of an all-out civil war intensified, Boutros Boutros Ghali, the United Nations Secretary-General, told the security council that he had called for plans to be drawn up

for a possible withdrawal of the 2,500-strong UN force in Rwanda. He added that the impending withdrawal of the 440-man Belgian contingent made the UN mission "difficult". Belgium was the former colonial ruler of the Central African republic.

In Kigali, officers serving with the UN said that the rebels had launched a major offensive from the north and east. The target, they said, was a barracks at Kacyiru blocking the entrance to the colonial quarter of Kigali where the army headquarters was based. A Belgian officer said the army was "desperate" and predicted a rebel victory. The fighting between the mainly Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front and the Hutu army has made it increasingly difficult for Western aid agencies to operate in the country. Relief workers said yesterday they were mystified about where tens of thousands of people, swarming out of the bloodstained capital, were heading as the rebels gained the upper hand in the battle for Kigali.

Anne-Marie Huby, of Medecins sans Frontieres, said : "It is not clear where the refugees are; we have not seen great numbers crossing the border into Burundi, Zaire, Tanzania or Uganda, so they must be displaced somewhere inside Rwanda."

One Western observer said she saw

an eight-mile river of people heading out of the capital. Tony Burgener, of the International Committee of the Red Cross, said : "It is quite impossible to say where they have gone, though they may be heading south towards Burundi. It is dangerous, but our people are still cruising Kigali picking up wounded."

Some Rwandans blamed President Habyarimana, a Hutu, for the scale of the bloodletting, in which estimates of 10,000 to 20,000 deaths seem entirely plausible. More people were slaughtered yesterday along roadsides in a residential area near the heart of the city by militant Hutu putting up new barricades as the rebels fought their way into central Kigali.

In about five to ten minutes that it took this correspondent to drive downhill to deliver film to a Belgian convoy at the French school and return to our hotel, three men had been killed at a barricade where militants had earlier waved us through with a smile and a bonjour madame.

Western troops still in Kigali said government forces had little hope of repelling the advance. "There is heavy fighting. Most of the strategic hills around the city are now controlled by our forces," Wilson Rutayisire, an official of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, said. The rebel leader is Colonel Alexis Kanyarengwe, a former Interior Minister.