

Rwanda government, rebels agree to form joint army

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DAR ES SALAAM, March 20 (AFP) - Rwanda's government and its rebel foes have agreed to form a joint army under a peace accord they hope to sign by next month, officials said Saturday.

As talks between the government and the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) went into a fifth day in the northern Tanzanian town of Arusha, reports from Rwanda's capital Kigali said the rebels had withdrawn from territory captured in the latest round of fighting last month and French troops were also leaving.

Sources close to the negotiations in Arusha expressed optimism that a million people made homeless by the 28-month civil war would be able to return to northern Rwanda after the rebel pullout.

France quadrupled the number of its troops in the tiny central African

state to nearly 700 to protect foreigners after fighting erupted on February 8, violating a seven-month ceasefire.

France has denied rebel accusations that its soldiers were propping up the 17-year rule of President Juvenal Habyarimana, but agreed to withdraw under an agreement between the government and the rebels.

A Tanzanian foreign ministry official said the two sides had agreed in principle to form a small national army that would remain politically neutral during Rwanda's planned transition to democracy.

Tanzania is mediating in the talks, also attended by observers from the United States, France, Rwanda's former colonial power Belgium, and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU).

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