

## Rwanda government, rebels agree on size of joint army

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DAR ES SALAAM, March 24 (AFP) - Rwanda's government and its rebel enemies have agreed to merge their two armies in a 22,000-strong joint force after battling each other in the hills for 29 months, diplomats said Wednesday.

The two sides clinched the deal at peace talks in the northern Tanzanian city of Arusha. But the diplomats, contacted by telephone in Arusha, said a March 9 ceasefire that ended the latest upsurge of fighting was still fragile.

International observers at the Tanzanian-mediated talks were optimistic that a comprehensive peace accord would be signed next month.

But they stressed that a lot of ground remained to be covered before a lasting end to the civil war that has made a million people homeless and ruined the tiny central African country's economy.

"We're getting closer to peace in

Rwanda," said Ami Mpungwe, a Tanzanian foreign ministry official involved in the peace process for the past nine months.

The agreement between the government and the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) marked a step towards integrating the rebels in the national army and bringing them into a transitional government before general elections.

The two sides were still discussing how many men each would contribute, Mpungwe said. Sources close to the negotiations said the new force would include 13,000 troops, 6,000 paramilitary policemen and 3,000 ordinary police.

The deal was seen as a compromise as the RPF had originally pressed for a force of 15,000 including the police, but the government wanted 25,000.

The two sides are still discussing how to demobilise thousands of sol-

diers and rebel guerrillas.

The RPF claims to have 15,000 fighters, although diplomats estimate its real strength at just under 10,000.

The government increased its army from 5,000 to 35,000 after the RPF invaded from neighbouring Uganda in October 1990.

Another major issue at the talks is the return of hundreds of thousands

of exiles of the minority Tutsi tribe whose families fled tribal massacres after losing a power struggle to the majority Hutus in the 1950s.

The mainly Tutsi RPF is fighting for their right to return.

The two sides are also to discuss the duration of transitional rule.

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