Rwanda massacres leave tens of thousands dead: ICRC

AFP, April 18, 1994

GENEVA, April 18 (AFP) - Tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people, have died in Rwanda's bloodbath as revenge killings spread from the capital, Kigali, to the remainder of the country, the Red Cross said Monday.

"It is a real tragedy. The massacres have now spread across Rwanda and there are tens of thousands of victims if not hundreds of thousands (of victims)", International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) spokesman Rene Luc Thevoz said, after speaking to Red Cross staff on the ground.

"Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced and a real exodus is under way" following ethnic clashes that have pitted the Hutu majority against the Tutsi minority in the small highland nation in eastern central Africa, he added.

About 40 foreign Red Cross staff are currently working in Rwanda, having entered the country from Burundi to the south and Uganda to the north.

The latest bout of killings began after Rwanda's Hutu president Juvenal Habyarimana and his counterpart from Burundi died when their plane crashed near Kigali on April 6 as they returned from peace talks in Tanzania.

Burundi government troops said the aircraft was shot down. Habyarimana's government had cut a peace deal with rebels of the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in Tanzania last August.

Overnight Sunday, RPF rebels kept up the pressure on government forces in Kigali, with fierce shelling and mortar fire aimed at weakening the army's resolve, a military spokesman in the Rwandan capital said.

The spokesman was speaking early Monday at the Meridien Hotel

in Kigali, situated on the front line in the northeast of the city, which is disputed by government and rebel forces.

Intermittent bursts of gunfire rang out during the night from the surrounding hills.

Most of the people killed after Habyarimana's death have been members of the Tutsi tribe which dominates the RPF, hacked or clubbed to death by hardline government supporters from the Hutu tribe.

Attempts by the United Nations to mediate a ceasefire – rebel and army commanders met Friday for the first time since the president's death – have so far failed to end the violence.

A second round of talks due Saturday did not take place.

Rwandan state radio said late Sunday that government forces had responded to a set of RPF preconditions for talks issued by the Tutsi-dominated movement on Saturday, but failed to indicate the tenor of the response.

Abdul Kabia of the UN Assistance Mission in Rwanda on Sunday said the army had accepted a rebel demand for joint patrols by security forces and RPF guerrillas to restore order.

The armed forces also agreed to the principle of a judicial inquiry into the bloodshed in Kigali.

But it was unclear how they had responded to the rebels' insistence that the government and the presidential guard – accused of horrific atrocities – be disbanded.

Many of the RPF conditions are thought unacceptable to the new armed forces chief Augustin Bizimungu – branded a "Hutu hardliner" by the RPF – appointed Saturday to replace General Deogratias Nasabimana, killed with the president.

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