

Rwanda rebels welcome U.N. force to replace French

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KIGALI, March 4 (AFP) - A Rwandan rebel spokesman on Thursday welcomed a proposal to have United Nations and Organisation of African Unity (OAU) troops replace French forces protecting foreigners in Rwanda.

The spokesman was unable to confirm reports of heavy fighting Wednesday around the northwestern town of Ruhengeri, 64 kilometres (40 miles) from the capital Kigali. But he said government forces had been trying to dislodge rebels from areas northwest and north of the capital.

"We agree that U.N. forces or other multinational forces could replace the French force which is guarding foreigners here," said Commander Karenzi Karake of the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF).

Karake is a member of a military observer group based in the capital Kigali including the government, the rebels and the OAU.

France quadrupled its troops in Rwanda to nearly 700 after the rebel launched a major offensive on February 8.

Karake stressed that the RPF would only accept an OAU force to be deployed in a proposed buffer zone between rebel and government positions. "Those would have to be OAU and not UN forces," Karake told AFP.

"But we would be very grateful if the U.N. troops deployed elsewhere in the country to stop ethnic massacres," Karake added.

The RPF says its offensive was intended to stop killings of members of the minority Tutsi tribe by supporters of the Hutu-dominated government.

The offensive, violating a seven-month ceasefire followed the murders of more than 300 Tutsis in northern Rwanda in January.

But human rights groups have

since accused the mainly Tutsi rebels
of also killing civilians.

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