Rwandan rebels dig in for trench war in Kigali

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KIGALI, April 15 (AFP) - Rwandan rebel forces were crouched in trenches along Umuganda boulevard in the northeast of Kigali, within sight of their headquarters in buildings that used to house the country's parliament.

Fighters from the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) peered southwards behind their machine guns, toward the front lines closer to the city centre.

These "inkontanyi," or cockroaches as country's Hutu majority calls the mainly Tutsi RPF fighters, have been stationed in Kigali since December under a now stalled peace process.

But they emerged from their barracks in the orgy of ethnic bloodletting mainly directed at Tutsis that followed the deaths last week of the country's Hutu president Juvenal Habyarimana and his counterpart from Burundi Cyprien Ntaryamira – also a Hutu – when their aircraft went down under suspicious circumstances.

They first said their purpose was to restore order in Kigali, but with the arrival of reinforcements from the north, they now appear bent on capturing the city.

In the past week they have advanced by degrees into neighbouring districts heading towards the city centre. At the same time, reinforcements "who had infiltrated" into other parts of the city have been attacking government forces elsewhere.

The RPF base is just next door to Hotel Amahoro which the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) has made into its headquarters. Just nearby is another UNAMIR base in the Hotel Meridien, which also serves as a refugee centre.

Until last week, the RPF was one of several Rwandan political parties preparing to take its place in the interim government and parliament to be set up under the peace accords signed last August 4 in Arusha, Tanzania ending three years of civil war.

The RPF has a "liaison officer" in

the Hotel Amahoro's yard and guards to keep watch on the building.

Outside, more khaki-uniformed RPF soldiers man the road-blocks. In areas under government control, the same jobs are done by mainly Hutu government forces and Hutu militia groups.

"Who are you. Where are you going?" soldiers ask us at the road blocks. After a brief search our vehicles is allowed through.

Down the road are more bodies. Near the Meridien, residents pointed to two bodies lying besides the fence round a house. They said RPF rebels killed the two, though the story was impossible to verify.

Ethnic killing continued Thursday in the city and the International Committee of the Red Cross announced it was suspending the evacuation of casualties after gunmen attacked a Red Cross vehicle Thursday and shot dead six casualties being taken to hospital.

At least 30 Red Cross workers have been killed in the carnage in Rwanda, officials said Thursday. At least 20,000 people have died in the country since fighting erupted last week.

Seen from the city centre, the civil war is closing in from the suburbs. Shelling can be heard there but only from a distance.

At the Meridien, where UN special envoy Jacques-Roger Booh-Booh is staying, the city backs onto hills controlled by the rebels. There the noise of shelling is deafening and bullets whistle past on the road.

Canadian General Romeo Dallaire, the UNAMIR commander, said government forces had heavier weapons than the rebels. The government weaponry includes 120 mm mortars and rocket-launchers, he said.

The RPF, which also has fewer fighters, has 81 and 82 mm. mortars of undetermined origin.

After an initial "blitzkrieg" attack led by RPF commander Paul Kagame, which made serious inroads into government lines, the RPF has now lapsed into a form of trench warfare that could last indefinitely unless the two sides are persuaded to reopen negotiations.

Undoubtedly the RPF has made advances but it is still a long way from victory in Kigali where its infiltrators probably lack a key advantage, the support of the people.

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