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Security Council Votes to Cut Rwanda Peacekeeping Force

By PAUL LEWIS,

In another retreat for the United Nations, the Security Council voted unanimously tonight to cut back the beleaguered peacekeeping force in Rwanda from some 1,700 at present to about 270, despite protests from human rights groups who fear that the move will only increase the carnage there.

Diplomats here say that the decision came after the United Nations Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, told the Council that the force should either be substantially strengthened so it can restore order or reduced to a symbolic size.

Mr. Boutros-Ghali rejected a third option of pulling it out altogether, which the United States had favored, saying the small force of 270 would be instructed to try to promote a cease-fire and assist with relief work. But in his report to the Council today, Mr. Boutros-Ghali appeared pessimistic about the prospects of an early end to the fighting in Rwanda. "I regretfully have concluded there is no prospect of a cease-fire being agreed upon in the coming days," he said.

Diplomats said there was no willingness to send another big peacekeeping force, like the one that had been sent to Somalia, to try to impose peace on Rwanda's warring tribes -- a task that the Secretary General said would require several thousand additional troops.

Most of the existing force is being withdrawn for its own safety because the United Nations troops had originally been sent to oversee a peace agreement and not to become involved in a new civil war, these diplomats said.

But the 270 peacekeepers being left behind in the Rwandan capital, Kigali, will try to insure the safety of the roughly 20,000 Rwandans who have taken refuge with the United Nations. Human rights organizations and aid workers fear the refugees may be killed after the troops pull out.

On Wednesday, the commander of the United Nations force in Rwanda sent several hundred nonessential soldiers, mainly troops from Ghana and Bangladesh, out of the country for their safety. The move followed a decision by Belgium to evacuate the battalion it had contributed to the peacekeeping force after 10 of its soldiers were tortured and killed.

African and other third world members of the Security Council had favored greatly strengthening the Rwandan force instead and giving it a new mandate to put down violence and help with relief work. But it remained unclear whether any country would have risked sending more soldiers to Rwanda now.

As the Council was deciding to reduce the peacekeeping force, tribal killings continued in Rwanda, with the Red Cross reporting tens or even hundreds of thousands of people killed in fighting that has now spread all over the country. Peace Talks Are Planned

The President of Tanzania, Ali Hassan Mwinyi, said leaders of the Hutu-dominated Government and the Tutsi-controlled opposition would hold peace talks Saturday in the northern Tanzanian town of Arusha.

But it was unclear whether these talks have any realistic chance of producing a settlement.

The present United Nations peacekeeping force is charged with patrolling a demilitarized zone in the north of the country, separating the Government forces from those of the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front and helping to protect the coalition government that the two sides are trying to form in Kigali.

But the United Nations has no mandate to go to war against the fighting bands who have reduced Kigali and much of the country to chaos. Moreover, after Belgium withdrew its battalion -- the only one trained and equipped to NATO standards -- the remaining forces from Ghana and Bangladesh were not considered up to the dangerous and sensitive mission of enforcing a return to law and order.

Human rights organizations fear that if the United Nations pulls out, tens of thousands of Rwandans living under its protection in the capital and at bases around the countryside will be slaughtered, adding to the already horrendous death toll. U.N. Protection Sought

An estimated 20,000 to 25,000 Rwandans, many of them from the Tutsi tribe, have sought protection at United Nations installations or at other areas under United Nations guard. "The United Nations has a moral and legal obligation to maintain at a minimum the force that is in Rwanda, at least until those under its protection have been moved to safety," said Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch, based in New York.

"The symbolic force the Security Council may be about to authorize would be a thin veil over another massacre," Mr. Roth added.

According to BBC reports from Kigali today, some 5,000 Rwandans under United Nations guard in the Amahoro soccer stadium in the capital are threatening to commit mass suicide if the troops protecting them are withdrawn.

The killing in Rwanda started after the country's President, Juvenal Habyarimana, and President Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi were killed on April 6 when a plane they were on crashed at Kigali airport under suspicious circumstances. The elite Hutu presidential guard went on a rampage, killing Tutsis and Hutu rivals and prompting a new offensive by the forces of the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front, whose troops have now invaded the capital.

In a cable received here today, the United Nations mediator in Kigali, Jacques-Roger Booh-Booh of Cameroon, reported that the Amahoro stadium was shelled again Wednesday, killing 11 refugees and wounding 40.

He reported that Kigali is increasingly short of food, drinking water and medical supplies and said that, with the streets littered with hundreds of dead bodies, the risk of epidemics is growing.

Map shows the location of Rwanda. (pg. A8)