

”Thousands of deaths” in Rwanda as foreigners prepare to flee

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BUJUMBURA, April 8 (AFP) - Thousands of people were reported killed and thousands more wounded in Rwanda Friday as ethnic battles sparked by the death of its president raged in the capital Kigali.

But at the United Nations in New York, officials said late Friday that fighters in Rwanda had agreed on a ceasefire and formed a transitional government.

”The ceasefire did not take hold immediately, but by all accounts the level of fighting has diminished significantly,” according to a UN statement.

Fighting since Wednesday had resulted ”not in hundreds, but thousands of deaths,” Red Cross official Philippe Gaillard told AFP. He spoke from Kigali after being contacted from Bujumbura, capital of neighbouring Burundi.

There were fears the tiny east African country of 6.7 million people

would plunge into all out civil war. The United Nations and several countries drew up plans for mass evacuations.

Gaillard said a Red Cross doctor and nurse who managed to visit the Kigali hospital Friday reported that 400 bodies lay jammed in the deserted morgue. Many more piled up in front of the building because of lack of space.

The victims were both civilian and military, men and women, killed by bullets, knives or even stones.

”The dead are piled up on top of each other, in piles measuring two metres (yards) by two, and 1.5 metres high,” Gaillard said.

As Kigali prepared for a possible full-scale invasion of the capital by rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPR) from the minority Tutsi tribe, bloody clashes between rebels and the Hutu-dominated national army turned key areas of the city into bat-

tle zones.

Fighting between the guard and the rebels was concentrated at the airport, held by guard troops and eyed by the West as a possible lifeline to safety.

In eastern Kigali near parliament buildings, more than 600 guard troops and 600 rebel fighters battled.

Fighting spread to the south of the country, according to reports Friday by Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF - Doctors without Borders) from Brussels.

Conditions were tense around Butare in southern Rwanda, where Hutu refugees were menacing local Tutsi inhabitants.

The United Nations said that a crisis committee made up of army and police had named an interim president, former Parliament head Theodore Sindikubwabo, to step into the vacuum left by the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana in a plane crash on Wednesday.

Six ministers, among them a prime minister, was chosen, two from each of the parties: Republican Democratic Movement, Social Democratic Party and Liberal Party.

The United Nations contacted the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and is awaiting their reaction. The rebels had signed an agreement with the government in August in Arusha, Tanzania.

"The representative of the RPF

assured me that he had been advised by his headquarters that their forces would remain at the demilitarized zone and would not seek to advance on Kigali," said Keating.

"If that improvement trend continues, we hope that it would be possible for (the UN mission) to continue and fulfill its existing mandate. If the situation deteriorates drastically we will have to assess in the light of the situation that prevails."

The UN mission in Rwanda has scheduled a meeting in the Rwandan capital Kigali on Saturday in hopes of cementing the accord, the UN statement said.

UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali asked the Security Council to make urgent plans for a possible evacuation of all UN civilian personnel in Rwanda.

Belgium said it was taking steps to protect its 1,500 nationals after 10 UN soldiers from Belgium were killed and Rwandans at Belgian missions were targeted by attackers.

The United States said it was closing its embassy in Kigali and drawing up plans to evacuate the 250 American citizens in Rwanda, leaving only a few diplomats.

Canada said the situation was too chaotic for it to be able to rescue its approximately 200 nationals, but added that it would as soon as possible.

One Belgian official did not rule

out a joint pullout involving other countries. Belgium, France, Britain and the United States were reported to be in contact with each other on Friday to discuss that option.

The Belgian soldiers were executed by Rwandan forces Thursday after trying to defend Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, a Tutsi who was killed by the presidential guard.

Fighting erupted near the residence of the US ambassador in the Rwandan capital Kigali, said Prudence Bushnell, acting secretary of state for African affairs.

Some 200 people had taken refuge in the residential compound, which was guarded by five UN peacekeepers.

In Paris, French Cooperation Minister Michel Roussin said that some 50 Rwandan officials including

the ministers of higher education, research, and trade and industry, and their families, had taken refuge in Kigali's French embassy since Thursday night.

The airport in Kigali was closed, complicating any evacuation plan. However, the airport in Bujumbura, the capital of neighboring Burundi, remained open, US officials said.

Nearly all of the 400 American citizens in Burundi are being urged to leave, the officials said.

The Rwandan rebels, which can mobilize around 20,000 men, had threatened to "sweep down" on Kigali if killings of Tutsis in the city by the presidential guard continued. The Hutu-dominated national army numbers around 30,000 troops.

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