

Fighting rages in Rwanda, foreigners get more time

Esipisu, Manoah

Reuters, April 15, 1994

NAIROBI, April 15 (Reuter) - Rebels and government troops waged all-out war for Rwanda's bloodsoaked capital on Friday as the U.N. got another 24 hours to evacuate the last foreigners.

Fighting between Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels and government units raged in key points of Kigali where thousands of people have been killed in an orgy of ethnic violence involving the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi tribes, the U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) said.

Other aid workers say some 100,000 Rwandan refugees have trekked to neighbouring states of Tanzania, Zaire and Burundi to escape the carnage in one of Africa's worst outbreaks of tribal violence in decades.

UNAMIR, in a statement received in Nairobi, said it had reached agreement with the rebels and the government troops allowing a further 24 hours to evacuate trapped foreigners.

"This means Belgian and French forces avoid direct combat with either rebels or government army units on the routes leading to the international airport in Kigali," it said.

"UNAMIR has to inform Rwandan combatants its evacuation itinerary."

It was not known how many foreigners were still trapped in the maze of slaughter that has claimed thousands of lives in the overcrowded central African nation of eight million people.

The RPF had initially given UNAMIR and Western forces up to 2200 GMT on Thursday to leave Rwanda and said troops from Belgium, the former colonial ruler, or other forces would be considered enemies after the deadline.

UNAMIR wants to relaunch a peace initiative similar to the agreement reached in Arusha, Tanzania in August 1993 which was shattered when fighting erupted after President Juvenal Habyarimana was killed last week in a rocket attack on his plane.

U.N. special representative Jacques-Roger Booh Booh, based in neighbouring Burundi, said he was holding consultations with the U.N. Security Council to define a new mandate for the U.N. force after the collapse of the Arusha ceasefire.

He said he was concerned about the lives of 12,000 Rwandans sheltering at a hospital under the care of UNAMIR's special medical units but with no food, water, or medical facilities.

Booh Booh said 933 other Rwandan civilian were guarded by Bangladeshi soldiers at Kigali's soccer stadium.

An army spokesman in Brussels said 200 Belgian paratroops had left Rwanda on Thursday and more will be flown out to Nairobi this morning. The 418 Belgians serving with U.N. forces are still there but were expected to evacuate.

Marc Emonts-Gast, the Belgian army spokesman in Kigali, said on Belgian radio that Belgian soldiers were going to evacuate the people from a football stadium near Kigali. U.N. forces were also going to fetch remaining Westerners from a hotel.

"To my knowledge there are no Belgians," he said.

About 400 paratroops were sent to evacuate foreigners on top of the Belgian U.N. forces already in Rwanda. There are currently about 420 Belgian "blue helmets" in Rwanda.

Belgium said on Thursday it would withdraw its forces from Rwanda. This came after the RPF said it would consider all foreign troops not meeting its withdrawal deadline as hostile.

The RPF has consistently said it was not involved in any truce with the Rwandan presidential guard and elements of the army – blamed for widespread bloodletting in the country where tribal rivalries between Hutus and Tutsis go back for centuries before colonial rule.

"There is no question of the RPF holding any negotiations whatsoever with this pseudo-government while the group of killers working for certain members of the government now based in Gitarama continue to kill all over the country," rebel radio said. Gitarama is a town 40 km (25 miles) from Kigali.

Kigali remained a contested area with forces of the Hutu-dominated government and rebels trading heavy fire but no group appeared in firm control.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said it was suspending work there after gunmen massacred wounded civilians under its care.

ICRC officials said they suspended operations to evacuate casualties after armed civilians at a roadblock in Kigali stopped an ICRC vehicle, dragged out six wounded civilians and shot them dead in front of ICRC staff.

In Geneva, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said at least 30 Rwandan Red Cross workers had been killed in the fighting and the toll could rise.

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