

# Rwandan rebels trek through hills to reach capital

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JARI, Rwanda, April 20 (Reuter) - "Tread softly here, this is a bad place," whispered the guerrilla in the darkness as the rebel Rwandan column penetrated government army frontlines.

On one of the steep hills looming above us, the muzzles of government machineguns flashed and a mortar bomb made the sound of an express train as it roared through the valley towards rebel trenches on the opposite hillside.

We held our breaths when a porter lost his footing on the muddy path. His burden of Katyusha rockets clattered to the ground.

In an abandoned village nearby a dog barked, but we had not been spotted and minutes later the column was moving again.

Guerrillas of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) have been advancing on foot to attack the capital Kigali by sneaking behind government lines at night and through villages stinking of death.

A team of three Reuters journalists joined a rebel supply column taking weapons and ammunition from the RPF's northern stronghold to their comrades fighting government forces for control of Kigali.

"You must be ready for ambushes. This area is infested," said our guerrilla guide Lieutenant Frank Ndore, as a line of 300 porters set off at dusk last week.

From their invasion of Rwanda in October 1990 until two weeks ago, the rebels and government forces faced each other from hillside trenches across the north of the tiny country.

But a nine-month-old peace agreement between the opposing parties - never properly implemented - fell apart after President Juvenal Habyarimana and the president of neighbouring Burundi were killed in a rocket attack on their plane on April 6. Mystery surrounds who fired the missile.

Habyarimana's militias of the Hutu clan and his government forces went on the rampage, killing countless thousands of Hutus who supported opposition parties and members of the Tutsi clan who contribute a greater part of the RPF's 20,000-strong army.

RPF officers said they were forced to infiltrate government lines and move on the capital to restore order and reinforce a battalion of 600 rebels who had been deployed in Kigali as part of the peace agreement since December.

Empty ammunition boxes and bullet casings littered the path our column took, evidence of how the first few thousand rebels punched holes through government positions to reach Kigali within three days of Habyarimana's death.

Most of the RPF forces were moving south, but at one point we saw rebels making the long walk back to hospital in Mulindi, their northern headquarters, bearing blood-spattered wounded comrades on makeshift stretchers.

As it neared the capital, our column slept in a deserted village where bloated corpses lay stinking at night and covered with flies during the day.

“You smell that ? That’s the perfume we have got used to fighting to become free,” said one young lieutenant.

A few peasants had not left their homes. Some clapped their hands and pleaded with the guerrillas to protect them from Hutu militias. Others looked on silently with hatred in their eyes.

Some villagers who saw us travelling with the rebels apparently reported our presence to government soldiers.

Later, on the British Broadcasting Corporation’s Swahili service, a Rwandan correspondent quoted sources as saying that white mercenaries fighting for the RPF had been killed in the area we were moving through.

Finally, the exhausted column struggled to the top of a hill overlooking Kigali.

The rebels fell to eating beef slaughtered along the way and carrots plucked from a deserted garden as they gazed at the plumes of smoke rising from mortar explosions in the embattled city.

“Are you happy to be here ?” I asked Captain Manuel, one of the column’s leaders whose face was hardened by years of war.

“I don’t know,” he said.

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