

Rwanda rebels gain ground in north, capital - U.N.

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NAIROBI, April 21 (Reuter) - Rebels captured a large swathe of northern Rwanda and appeared to be gaining ground slowly in the capital Kigali, U.N. peacekeepers said.

U.N. commanders said the 20,000-strong rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) captured the key frontline town of Byumba on Tuesday and held a slice of Rwanda from Kidaho to Gabiro in the northeast.

"The RPF is advancing in the north and in Kigali," a U.N. commander told Reuters from Kigali after new clashes in northern suburbs of the city.

Awaiting orders from New York on whether all U.N. troops should pull out, U.N. officials said rebel and government forces had verbally agreed to protect refugees in case of a total U.N. withdrawal.

But officers said they expected any order to pull out the remaining 1,600 members of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) would increase bloodshed in Rwanda.

In Geneva the International Committee of the Red Cross said the killings in Rwanda could run into hundreds of thousands.

"Tens, maybe hundreds of thousands killed : the exact number of victims of the massacres that have swept Rwanda over the last two weeks will never be known," the ICRC said in a statement.

The civil war and massacres were triggered by the killing of the President of Rwanda when a rocket downed his plane on April 6. An estimated two million people have fled their homes and more than 50,000 sought refuge in four neighbouring countries.

UNAMIR Executive Director Abdul Kabia told Reuters by telephone the RPF and armed forces agreed verbally on Thursday to guarantee the safety of refugees hiding in areas held by them in the event of a total withdrawal of U.N. forces from Rwanda.

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