

Rulers Flee as Rwanda Rebels Take Key Garrison

Sam Kiley

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THE last members of Rwanda's rump government fled towards the French-protected southwestern town of Cyangugu after troops of the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front captured the northern garrison town of Ruhengeri, a government minister said last night.

"The President, the Prime Minister and many of the ministers are now in Cyangugu," Jean-de-Dieu Habimeza, Social Affairs Minister, said in Goma, eastern Zaire, where he and some of his colleagues had fled.

In Paris the French Foreign Ministry announced that the fleeing ministers would not be welcome in the safe zone set up to protect civilians in southwestern Rwanda. Tens of thousands of Rwandan refugees poured into Zaire after the fall of Ruhengeri.

In Geneva, Sadako Ogata, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, said her agency could not cope with the exodus and appealed to the warring

factions there to guarantee their safety.

Faustin Twagiramungu, whom the front named last week as the Prime Minister, said after his arrival in the capital, Kigali, that the people fleeing the region needed to be reassured. Mr Twagiramungu, a member of the Republican Democratic Movement and Hutu moderate, is expected to form a "broad-based" government by the weekend.

"There has to be reconciliation and regeneration," he said.

The front has vowed to declare a unilateral ceasefire soon, but has insisted that it will stop fighting only when the interim government, formed after moderates were murdered in the first bloodletting in April, steps down and those who organised the massacres are arrested.

The main problem facing the front is how to restore its international and domestic credibility after the

people it has claimed to be freeing have constantly fled ahead of its advances. No evidence of widespread or systematic massacres committed by the front has emerged over the past three months.

Years of propaganda have convinced the Hutu population that they would be slaughtered if they were overrun by the front.

“It will take a generation to get over that sort of mistrust,” Philippe Gaillard, former head of the Red Cross in Kigali, said.

Aid officials issued a warning that

unstable Zaire may have to host between 500,000 and a million Hutus.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said that people had been crossing at one border post between the Rwandan town of Gisenyi and Goma in Zaire at a rate of 15,000 an hour. The committee said it had enough food in Goma to feed 150,000 people for a month.

Gemmo Lodesani, director of the World Food Programme in Burundi, said that western Rwanda “now faces a human and ecological disaster”.