

U.N. troops evacuate Kigali hotel amid fighting

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Reuters, April 24, 1994

NAIROBI, April 24 (Reuter) - U.N. peacekeepers evacuated 300 people from a hotel in shell-blasted central Kigali on Sunday after a fierce bombardment of rebel headquarters in the Rwandan capital.

U.N. officials said government forces and Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels battled with artillery and rockets overnight until late in the morning in one of their fiercest exchanges in days.

"The main building held by the RPF was pounded very heavily and there were intense exchanges between both sides. It was not a quiet night at all. Very few people could sleep because of the explosions," said a U.N. official by telephone from Kigali.

U.N. troops then evacuated about 300 people, mostly civilian refugees but including about 15 U.N. staff and some journalists, from the nearby Meridien Hotel and took them to the King Faisal hospital.

"The hotel was not hit by shells but it was becoming much too dangerous to keep anyone there," Abdul Kabia, executive director of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) told Reuters.

There are already an estimated 9,000 refugees sheltering under U.N. protection at the King Faisal hospital in addition to 5,000 at the national Amahoro stadium near U.N. headquarters.

Among those evacuated from the Meridien Hotel were members of a U.N. team sent to Kigali to examine the possibility of starting distributing food to civilians trapped in the capital.

UNAMIR is cutting its forces in Rwanda to the bare bone on orders of the U.N. Security Council, which decided on Thursday only 270 members of the originally 2,500-strong force should remain.

Aid agencies say tens of thousands of civilians will be left without protection from a neutral force after the U.N. pullout.

The agencies estimate 100,000 people have been butchered and two million made homeless since violence erupted when Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana was killed in a rocket attack on his plane on April 6.

The killings, mostly of members of the Tutsi minority or Hutu sympathisers, are the bloodiest mass slaughter in Africa since 100,000 people perished in neighbouring Burundi in 1972.

Abdul Kabia said about 500 U.N. troops and civilian staff were still in Rwanda and would be gradually thinned down to 270.

He said the remaining troops included peacekeepers and military observers from Fiji, Nigeria, Senegal, Congo, Ghana, Mali, Togo, Zimbabwe, Austria, Bangladesh, Poland, Canada and Tunisia.

He added that UNAMIR force commander Brigadier-General Romeo Dallaire was holding separate meetings with RPF commander Major-General Paul Kagame and the chief of staff of the Rwandan armed forces as part of the campaign to end the bloodshed.

Diplomats said they doubted the government would be able to respond to an unilateral ceasefire from midnight (2200 GMT) on Monday declared by the RPF, which demands killings stop within 96 hours.

“The government is in complete disarray. It has a huge problem of coordination and communication between its ministers in Gityrama and its forces in the field,” a diplomat said.

The government fled to Gityrama, about 40 km (25 miles) southwest of Kigali, after rebel forces attacked the capital.

In Nyanza district, just south of the city, journalists found new evidence of massacres including a pile of about 60 rotting bodies and dozens more corpses spilling out of doorways to mud huts.

Outside one house, a six-year-old girl with a large machete wound to her neck hid under a blanket amid bodies of men, women and children and pretended to be dead when rebels approached.

She collapsed out of fear when RPF gunmen picked her up and carried her to a bush medical post where she received first aid. She said her entire family had been slaughtered before her eyes.

RPF officers quoted some survivors from the massacre at Nyanza as saying they were Tutsis who were stopped by troops on the road to Amahoro stadium and were forced to the hill, where soldiers shot them and attacked them with machetes and grenades.

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