

Civil war edges closer as rebels advance on calm Kigali

Serge Arnold

AFP, April 9, 1994

NAIROBI, April 9 (AFP) - Opposition rebels advanced on the Rwandan capital Kigali Saturday, warning western troops not to stand in their way, after rejecting an interim government to stanch the country's latest bloodbath.

Rebel and government forces clashed north of Kigali during the day, as the Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPR) rebels left their bases in the north, pushing the east African country even closer to the brink of civil war.

Kigali itself, where at least 1,000 have died in the last three days in fierce inter-ethnic clashes sparked by the deaths Wednesday of the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi, was calm Saturday evening, according to aid officials.

FPR spokeswoman Christine Umutoni Nyinawumwami said the rebels "had taken it upon themselves" to move to Kigali, but would "not al-

low French troops to stand in their way during this mission."

"We understand that there are some French troops in Kigali, but they are warned that they should not (halt us on) our way to this mission," she told AFP in the Ugandan capital Kampala.

"If they do it, we are ready to face them, as they ... can be killed," Nyinawumwami said.

She was referring to some 300 French troops which took control of Kigali airport early on Saturday amid preparations to evacuate the 600 French nationals in Rwanda.

In Paris, French foreign ministry confirmed it would begin evacuating its nationals from Kigali Saturday.

The ministry said the first of a number of military flight would leave Kigali airport Saturday evening.

No clear details were available Saturday evening of how far the FPR, which comprise 20,000 troops, had

advanced.

Nyinawumwami also said that the new government announced on Saturday by Rwandan parliamentary speaker Theodore Sindikubgabo, who said he had assumed the presidency of the country, "was illegitimate and unacceptable."

Charging that the new government was composed mainly of people who opposed last August's Arusha peace accord signed by the government and FPR, Nyinawumwami declared: "We do not agree with this type of government that puts itself in power after killing thousands of innocent people."

She said that the FPR's move on Kigali was aimed at neutralising the Rwandan army and trying to put in place an administration that will ensure peace and stability.

Sindikubgabo announced Saturday on Radio Rwanda, monitored in the Kenyan capital Nairobi, that he had assumed the presidency and formed a new government whose priority would be to restore peace in the war-torn nation and to continue talks with the FPR rebels to achieve that end.

The rebel advance follows three days of ethnic unrest in the wake of the deaths of Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundi's President Cyprien Ntaryamira on Wednesday night in a plane crash the Rwandan defence ministry attributed

to an armed attack.

Kigali appeared calm Saturday evening. In Brussels, aid group Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF) said relative calm had returned to Kigali.

MSF said in a statement that the lull had allowed medical teams to reach Kigali hospital on Saturday and patrol the streets to collect wounded victims of the fighting.

MSF workers found "very many" wounded victims of the fighting at the hospital, including 50 who urgently needed major surgery, the statement said.

Late Saturday a Belgian Defence Ministry spokesman in Brussels said that Rwandan armed forces had blocked the runway of Kigali airport, raising doubts about the mission of Belgian paratroopers bound for Rwanda.

The spokesman, Colonel Freddy van Deweghe, was speaking after the departure from Brussels of two plane-loads of Belgian paratroopers to protect about 2,000 Belgian nationals in Rwanda, and prepare for their evacuation.

Meanwhile in New York diplomatic sources said the UN Security Council is to hold an urgent meeting Sunday to discuss measures to protect foreigners living in Rwanda.

"We hope to explain to members of the Council that it is a purely humanitarian mission aimed at evacuating our nationals," said one French

diplomat.

bur/mt/jms