

Heavy fighting in Kigali as interim government goes into hiding

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KIGALI, April 12 (AFP) - Heavy shooting rocked several areas around Kigali Tuesday, raising fears that rebel reinforcements had entered the Rwandan capital already ravaged by tribal warfare.

The interim government on Tuesday left the Kigali hotel where it had set up its headquarters for an unknown destination, sparking panic in the city as Rwandans emerged from hiding to take their chances to escape a new round of bloodletting between the country's Hutu majority and Tutsi minority.

Confirmation of the exact position of the reinforcements from the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPR), estimated at between 1,000 and 4,000 men, could not be obtained from independent sources.

But a military official from the UN Mission for Assistance in Rwanda (UNMAR) said the FPR seemed "to feel strong" and could "take the city."

France meanwhile closed its embassy Tuesday, adding to the sense of panic among Rwandans trying to flee the fighting.

A French Foreign Ministry spokesman in Paris said Ambassador Jean-Michel Marlaud had been instructed to close the embassy given the "deterioration of the situation" and was on his way to Bangui in Central Africa.

French paratroops sent in to evacuate foreign nationals said they would also leave as soon as control over the city's foreign evacuation had been handed over to Belgian forces. The few remaining foreign nationals, waiting at the French school, were to be brought to the airport in a convoy, they said.

The shooting early Tuesday was concentrated in Kigali's southern Gikondo area, according to Captain Eric Millet of the French Third Parachute Regiment.

The shooting was now coming from the north, instead of the east of the city where the RPF already had a battalion of 600 men, grouped under the terms of a peace agreement reached with the mostly Hutu government last August.

"It is hard to tell if the forces shooting from the north are RPF reinforcements (advancing) from the position they held two days ago 15 kilometres (nine miles) away, or if the rebels in the east have repositioned themselves," Millet added.

According to the Belgian Defence Ministry, its evacuation operation should be completed within three or four days. Belgians made up the largest group of foreign nationals in Rwanda, a former Belgian colony, with more than 1,500 living there.

It said a total of 446 Belgians had fled Rwanda, and about 1,000 others remained behind. It was impossible to know how many of those wanted to be evacuated, the ministry said.

A group of about 50 Rwandans who had sought refuge in the French embassy were brought to the airport Tuesday morning in a convoy of trucks. Their breakfast plates were still lying on the tables of the deserted embassy, whose doors had been left open.

"Everyone has left," confirmed the head of Kigali's International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Philippe Gaillard, who had placed

sand bags around the ICRC offices in preparation for the fighting to come.

UN commanders, present in Rwanda to enforce the peace accord signed by the RPF and the government last August in Arusha, Tanzania in a bid to end a three-year-old civil war, have been trying to secure a truce between the two sides.

The latest flare-up in the ethnic conflict erupted after the country's long-ruling Hutu president, Juvenal Habyarimana, was killed when his plane crashed here last week, reportedly after being hit by a rocket.

His death sparked an orgy of tribal violence, mostly by Hutus killing Tutsis, which international relief workers said left tens of thousands dead.

The RPF has refused to recognise the interim government set up after Habyarimana's death, saying the new leadership is hostile to the Tutsi's bid to gain a share of power.

Last August's UN-brokered agreement was to have brought the rebels into a broad-based transition government and parliament prior to elections next year, but efforts never progressed before Habyarimana's death.

In Kigali on Monday, Rwanda's interim prime minister Jean Kambanda told AFP his government was still ready to comply with the Arusha accords provided there was no "cheating."

"We want a truce, that would al-

low us to open overall negotiations on a ceasefire, then political negotiations," he said.

In Brussels the Belgian Defence Ministry announced Tuesday that nearly 400 evacuees, mainly Belgians, had arrived Tuesday from Nairobi. Another flight carrying 400 people was expected at Brussels airport early Tuesday afternoon.

In Moscow the ITAR-TASS agency said 22 Russian nationals, including Aeroflot and embassy staff

and their dependents, had been taken to neighbouring Burundi. They were expected to return to Russia in the next few days, the agency said quoting the foreign ministry's Africa department.

An in Paris, French Cooperation Minister Michel Roussin met 474 French, German and American evacuees from Kigali early Tuesday and two more flights were expected later in the day.

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