Kigali clashes resume after peace talks fail

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KIGALI, April 15 (AFP) - Renewed clashes between advancing Rwandan rebels and government soldiers erupted in the capital Kigali on Friday after the United Nations failed to organise talks between the two sides.

Belgian troops who evacuated foreigners fleeing tribal bloodletting left Kigali on Friday as a rebel ultimatum for foreign troops other than UN peacekeepers to quit the country or face attacks expired, the Belgian ambassador to Kenya said.

Belgium has also decided to withdraw its 400 peacekeepers from the 2,500-strong UN force, saying that the mission in Rwanda has become impossible. But no date has yet been set for their departure.

Tens of thousands of refugees continued the exodus on foot into neighbouring countries, creating a regional refugee crisis as aid agencies struggled to set up camps to fed and care for them.

But the fighting has severely disrupted emergency relief in the Rwanda, where the International Committee of the Red Cross said it was scaling down operations after gunmen killed six wounded people being taken to hospital in a Red Cross vehicle.

Thirty Red Cross workers have been killed, the worst loss in the agency's 75-hour history, since the deaths of the presidents of Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi in a plane crash last week plunged the central African nation into a bloodbath in which 20,000 people have died.

At least seven employees of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) have also been killed.

The dirt roads that criss-cross Kigali's green hills were left littered with bodies as government supporters from the majority Hutu tribe hunted down people from the minority Tutsi group that dominates the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front.

Government radio on Friday called for unity against the Front.

Rebel radio had urged Rwandans to unite against the ruling "clique of killers" on Thursday, when the Front rejected ceasefire talks with "the enemies of peace."

A meeting planned between the two sides Thursday never materialised.

UN chief in Rwanda Romeo Dallaire said it had perhaps been "premature" and said UN officials were engaged in shuttle diplomacy and still hoped to bring the rebels and government forces to the negotiating table.

But the security council is reviewing the future of the peacekeeping mission in Rwanda, launched last year to monitor a ceasefire under peace accords signed in August to end a three-year civil war.

The Belgian pullout will weaken the UN operation and casts doubt on its future, analysts said.

Belgium has been accused by government forces of backing or at least sympathising with the rebels, while the rebels accuse France of siding with the government.

The UN force has also been criticised by hardline government supporters for allegedly favouring the rebels, who invaded from neighbouring Uganda in October 1990.

Rebel radio has said the Front's guerrillas, estimated to number 20,000, will not stop fighting until they have seized control of Kigali, where sporadic artillery and small arms fire echoed Friday.

Tens of thousands of refugees have arrived from Rwanda in Zaire, Tanzania, Burundi and Zaire.

Another 50,000 refugees from Burundi, who sought refuge in Rwanda after ethnic clashes in Burundi last year, have also fled to Zaire.

The assassination of Burundi's first Hutu president last year triggered massacres that left tens of thousands dead.

Tutsis, the feudal aristocracy in Rwanda and Burundi, form about 15 percent of the population in both countries, which share the same blood-steeped history of ethnic feuding between Tutsis and the majority Hutus.

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