[RPF and Rwandan government forces fail to reach ceasefire as massacres continue in Kigali]

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KIGALI, March 15 (AFP) - Rwandan rebels and government forces opened United Nations-brokered talks here Friday, but failed to agree on a truce as ethnic bloodletting and artillery duels raged on in the body-strewn capital.

Commanders of the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and government military officers met for nearly an hour in the Meridien Hotel after days of shuttle diplomacy by UN officials trying to end a week of ethnic bloodletting that has claimed 20,000 lives.

It was the first meeting between the rebels, dominated by the minority Tutsi tribe, and the government forces, mainly members of the majority Hutu group, since the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana in a plane crash nine days ago which triggered the tribal slaughter.

Government forces said the plane was shot down. Cyprien Ntaryamira, president of neighbouring Burundi which shares the same ethnic composition and blood-steeped history of tribal feuding as Rwanda, also died in the crash.

The rebels and government forces had first agreed to meet Thursday, but the talks were delayed as both sides issued hardline statements urging Rwandans to unite under their banner.

Friday's meeting was attended by the commander of UN forces in Rwanda, General Romeo Dallaire, and UN special envoy Jacques-Roger Booh-Booh.

Meanwhile rebel guerrillas and government soldiers dug in for a trench war in Kigali. Hutu killing squads continued hacking and clubbing to death Tutsi civilians Friday after the departure of Belgian, French and Italian troops rushed to Rwanda to evacuate foreigners, sources said.

The foreign troops left Rwanda as

a rebel ultimatum for external forces other than UN peacekeepers to quit or face attacks expired.

The dirt roads that criss-cross Kigali's green hills are still strewn with corpses.

The carnage, which rekindled memories of several waves of similar massacres since the late 1950s, has given one of Africa's smallest countries a giant reputation for mass killings.

Among the dead were 30 local Red Cross workers – the biggest single loss in the 75-year history of the Red Cross movement – seven employees of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and 10 Belgian soldiers.

The International Committee of the Red Cross suspended its operations to ferry wounded civilians to hospital after six wounded people being taken to hospital in a Red Cross vehicle were killed Thursday.

Belgium's earlier decision to withdraw its 400 peacekeepers from the 2,500-strong UN force in Rwanda, made up of soldiers from 23 nations, has cast doubt over the future of the UN operation, initially intended to monitor a ceasefire under peace accords signed in August to end a three-year civil war.

The Belgians' departure was now "imminent," diplomats said.

"Now we're going to be able to kill each other on our own," said a Rwandan refugee in Nairobi.

The UN Security Council is to review the mandate of the peacekeeping operation, confirmed UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali Friday during an official visit to Madrid.

He said the Belgian decision to withdraw had been taken with his agreement.

"The decision on whether to replace them will be taken in the next few hours by the Security Council," Boutros-Ghali said.

He stressed that, whatever the outcome of the council's deliberation, the UN would continue to press for a ceasefire through diplomatic channels along the lines of the Arusha accord signed by both sides in August and providing for power-sharing between the two factions and free elections in 1995.

The UN mission has thus far been powerless to stem the slaughter.

Diplomatic sources in New York said the UN was considering either scaling down its operation to a symbolic presence, or leaving only two battalions of peacekeepers based at Kigali airport.

But the world body will only leave the peacekeepers if the rebels and government forces agree to a ceasefire, the sources said.

Thousands of Rwandans have fled on foot into neighbouring Burundi, Zaire, Tanzania and Uganda, creating a regional refugee crisis as aid agencies struggle to set up camps to feed

and care for them. at/dc/jms