

Rebel Soldiers Poised to Take Rwanda Capital

Sam Kiley

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Rwandan rebels yesterday looked set to deal the final blows to the government accused this week by the United Nations Secretary-General of genocide against its people.

The rebels pounded the city centre with artillery fire soon after Iqbal Riza, a UN envoy trying to broker a ceasefire, left. A suburb a mile from the airport was captured and another key area was under threat. Mr Riza left Kigali by road, taking government ceasefire proposals to the rebels in their northern headquarters at Byumba. But he held out little hope given the rebels' apparent success.

Young soldiers of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) crossed the Anyaru river yesterday about 30 miles west of Gitarama where the remnants of the government have been holed up for about a month. Making the crossing through water clogged with bodies from massacres of Tutsi and opposition supporters, the rebels were surprised by the lack

of opposition to their advances. They had been held up for a week in hills overlooking the Rwabusoro bridge by the government forces who fled across the river and destroyed the bridge on Tuesday, having prepared defences further into their territory. Crossing the river in driving rain at night, three companies of rebel soldiers were able to drive the enemy from their trenches. The rout of the government soldiers was illustrated by the hastily dismantled heavy machineguns and other weapons and personal belongings left strewn in their wake. The rebel forces were able to push the army back 20 miles on Wednesday, and are now poised about eight miles west of Gitarama. They are also heading for Butare, Rwanda's main connection to Burundi in the south.

According to Western aid workers, most members of the rump Rwandan government have moved from Gitarama to Butare, and are likely to try to escape rebel attacks by driving west to Bukavu in Zaire,

where President Mobutu will provide them with sanctuary.

Lieutenant Wilson Ndayambaje, a rebel officer, put their success down to the fact that they were an (unpaid) army fighting for a cause against a demoralised force of men more preoccupied with wiping out their civilian opponents than defending themselves. "They just crack and run after a little bit of a fight. They seem more used to shooting at unarmed people than real soldiers," he said.

The RPF, a Tutsi-dominated army but which is also about 30 to 40% Hutu, is desperate to gain ground in the government areas to save tens of thousands of Tutsi who are being held in concentration camps by the army and members of the interahamwe

("those who kill together") civilian militias. At least 40,000 Tutsi are gathered in a seminary in Kabgayi, two miles from Gitarama. Surrounded by soldiers and interahamwe, they are raped and slaughtered daily while scores die weekly from starvation and disease. The International Committee of the Red Cross and the UN's World Food Programme have been sending in provisions and medical supplies, but have been powerless to stop the murders. "We have to get to Gitarama to save the people. We know that if we take a long time they could all be slaughtered by the enemy," said Lieutenant Ndayambaje.

By Sam Kiley on Rwabusoro Bridge, Near Ngenda.