

Rebels poised to seize Kigali, interim government goes into hiding

Annie Thomas

AFP, April 12, 1994

KIGALI, April 12 (AFP) - Ethnic Tutsi rebels fought their way into the Rwandan capital Tuesday, sending the government, foreigners and thousands of residents fleeing in fear of a new wave of tribal bloodletting.

As intense fighting rocked several parts of the city, the Hutu-dominated interim government fled its headquarters in the Hotel des Diplomates in downtown Kigali "for a more secure place," a Rwandan soldier in the hotel said.

Unconfirmed reports said the week-old government had moved to the town of Gitarama, southwest of the city.

The last foreign residents seeking to leave the city were meanwhile escorted to the airport by French and Belgian paratroopers. France, Russia, Germany and the United States said they had evacuated virtually all their nationals from the city.

In Kampala, Christine Umu-

toni, spokeswoman for the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), said its forces had entered Kigali and were about to join a battalion of 600 fellow rebels camped outside the city under a UN-sponsored peace plan approved by the two sides in August.

She said RPF forces were awaiting instructions from their headquarters to seize the capital, where she said "government forces had dispersed, many of them surrendering with their arms to the RPF."

The entry of the RPF rebels into the city was later confirmed by UN headquarters in New York.

The RPF totals around 20,000 rebels, as against an estimated 30,000 government troops.

The RPF radio said advancing RPF forces had signed an agreement with UN officials Tuesday morning guaranteeing the evacuation of foreign nationals still left in the country.

But the rebels warned also that "any foreign troops who were not part of the UN mission have 12 hours to leave the country at the end of evacuation operations."

UN commanders have been present in Rwanda to enforce the peace accord.

They were joined by troops from France and Belgium sent in to oversee the evacuation of foreign nationals after the violence broke out.

The French troops were due to leave the country after the last French citizens were evacuated Tuesday.

The latest fighting erupted after the country's long-ruling Hutu president, Juvenal Habyarimana, was killed when his plane crashed here April 6, reportedly after being hit by a rocket.

His death sparked an orgy of killing, mostly of minority Tutsis by the majority Hutus. More than 10,000 people were killed in the capital alone, according to foreign relief workers.

The RPF has said for several days that it was sending troops into the

capital to "restore order" and has rejected the interim government set up after Habyarimana's death, saying it was hostile to the Tutsis' goal of sharing power.

As the rebels closed in on the capital and the government fled, residents emerged from hiding in their homes, hotels and foreign missions and tried to escape an expected wave of revenge killings by the Tutsi forces.

"It's going to be carnage," predicted a Nairobi-based Rwandan diplomat.

About 50 civilians who had sought refuge in the French embassy before it closed Tuesday were taken from the building by French troops and escorted to the airport.

The French then handed over the evacuation effort to Belgian troops.

In a later operation, the Belgian soldiers hid a group of civilians from the now-abandoned French cultural center in the bottom of their troop carriers and took them to the airport to protect them from being massacred.