

Rwandan army launches a swoop for arms in Kigali

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KIGALI, Jan 12 (AFP) - Rwandan soldiers launched a major hunt for arms in the capital on Thursday, a day after a cross-border attack the United Nations blamed on troops of the former government led to the most serious pitched battle since the civil war.

Residents of several Kigali districts were told not to leave their homes as Tutsi-led soldiers of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPR), which ousted a Hutu majority regime and seized power in July, carried out the weapons search, which lasted all morning.

The military commander in the city made clear in a broadcast that the soldiers were looking for arms and the national radio said the sweep was unconnected with the raid on Wednesday by about 50 armed men who crossed back into the country from Zaire.

The UN Assistance Mission in

Rwanda (UNAMIR) said the attack was launched by Hutu soldiers of the former government army who were routed by the RPF in July after three months of ethnic carnage which followed the suspicious death in a plane crash of president Juvenal Habyarimana.

"This was not the start of a major operation but, on the evidence, the FAR (former Rwandan Armed Forces) have decided to launch small attacks to destabilise the normalisation under way in Rwanda," UNAMIR military spokesman Stephane Grenier said Thursday.

Radio Rwanda, however, blamed the attacks on "bandits" and said the exchange of fire with RPA troops had lasted only half an hour. Military officials, who have always said they feared that the Hutu soldiers have been planning such operations, minimised the incident.

UNAMIR, which was pursuing an

investigation Thursday into the attack at Nyamasheke in the southwest of the country, said the fighting lasted for some two hours. Grenier said the attack was a "worrying development".

"It is not yet the beginning of a civil war, but we cannot avoid concluding, in view of growing numbers of armed incursions, that the action is planned," Grenier said. He blamed "some leaders of the former regime".

Observers in the region doubt that the former FAR and their feared extremist Hutu militia allies, the Interahamwe, currently represent a serious threat to the FPR, but they are capable of destabilising Rwanda,

where the RPF has installed a coalition government including moderate Hutus.

The militiamen and some former soldiers are accused of massacring more than 500,000 people, mainly Tutsis, in a genocidal campaign during the war and then of terrorising Rwandan refugees gathered in hundreds of thousands in camps in eastern Zaire.

The RPF was formed mainly of long-time Rwandan exiles who had fled to Uganda during and after a Hutu uprising in 1959, before independence of the former Belgian colony.

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