Sporadic fighting as peace talks set to resume

Annie Thomas

AFP, April 16, 1994

KIGALI, April 16 (AFP) - Sporadic gunfire echoed in the Rwandan capital early Saturday as rebel and government negotiators were due to hold a second round of talks on a ceasefire to end more than a week of ethnic bloodshed.

The minority Tutsti-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and representatives of the Hutu-led government were due to meet later Saturday at the city's Meridien hotel following a one-hour session of UN-mediated talks on Friday.

At Friday's meeting RPF commanders and government army officers failed to agree on a truce, but exchanged ceasefire proposals that should provide the basis for Saturday's talks, UN officials said.

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.

The breakup of Friday's talks was followed by an intense half-hour exchange of artillery fire between the two sides late Friday, but only sporadic gunfire could be heard early Saturday.

At UN headquarters in New York, the Security Council called for an immediate ceasefire in the east African nation where more than 20,000 people have been killed in ethnic slaughter sparked by the death of the long-ruling Hutu president, Juvenal Habyarimana, in an apparent assassination.

The current council president, Colin Keating of New Zealand, said late Friday: "In the members view, the immediate priority in Rwanda is the establishment of a ceasefire between the government forces and the RPF."

"The situation is grave and coun-

cil members are determined not to allow the security of UNAMIR personnel to be placed at serious risk," he said, referring to the UN peacekeeping mission established in Rwanda to implement a peace agreement signed last August between the rebels and government.

That agreement, which involved a power-sharing arrangement between Tutsis and Hutus and plans for elections next year, collapsed following Habyarimana's death in an aircrash on April 6.

But the council was unable to decide on the future of the UNAMIR operation following Belgium's decision to withdraw its 400-member contingent in light of the fighting.

Differences persist among the 15 council members over whether to maintain the peacekeeping presence, now reduced to some 2,000 soldiers from some 20 nations, or cut back to a diplomatic presence if there is no ceasefire agreement.

"Council members intend to keep under constant review the force levels and activities of UNAMIR and to take decisions in this regard at the appropriate time," Keating said.

Rebel guerrillas and government soldiers are dug in for a trench war in Kigali and 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.

The foreign troops left Rwanda as a rebel ultimatum for external forces other than UN peacekeepers to quit or face attacks expired.

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.

Tens of thousands of Rwandans have fled on foot into neighbouring Burundi, Zaire, Tanzania and Uganda to escape the fighting, creating a regional refugee crisis as aid agencies struggle to set up camps to feed and care for them.

There were also reports Friday of more than 1,000 Tutsis being massacred by Hutu fighters in a Rwandan village east of the capital Kigali.

A correspondent for the Spanish daily El Pais said dozens of bodies, most of them horribly mutilated, were lying in and around a church in Gikoro, some 40 kilometres (25 miles) east of the capital Kigali.

The journalist quoted two Roman Catholic priests who said 1,180 people had been killed in the massacre last Wednesday. All were Tutsis, the

priests said.

Rwandan national radio meanwhile accused Uganda Saturday of "active participation" alongside the RPF.

The pro-government radio said it had proof that Ugandan Puma helicopters and armoured troop transporters had been used in the conflict.

It also said that "white fighters" had been supporting the rebels, and that two of these had been killed.

Uganda was used as a base by RPF at the start of the conflict in October 1990.

at/dm