

Refugees flee Rwanda, U.S. groups to pull out staff

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NEW YORK, April 8 (Reuter) - Thousands of refugees fled the carnage in Rwanda, crossing into neighbouring Tanzania, as international relief groups sought to evacuate personnel from fighting, U.S.-based aid groups said.

The New York-based International Rescue Committee (IRC) said 4,000 refugees had already fled into Tanzania and more were expected in Ngara, a Tanzanian town near the southeastern corner of Rwanda.

“There is great concern of a new influx of refugees from Rwanda to the Ngara region ... The estimate for possible influx is 150,000 refugees,” an IRC officer in Tanzania told the organisation’s headquarters.

In Geneva, a UNHCR (U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees) spokesman said about 5,000 Rwandans and Burundis had fled their countries for Zaire since their presidents were killed Wednesday in a rocket attack

on their plane, sparking tribal bloodletting and renewed civil war.

Foreigners working in the central African country, a former Belgian colony, were caught in the violence.

Among those killed were 10 Belgians serving as U.N. peacekeepers who were guarding Rwanda’s Prime Minister Agatha Uwilingiyimana, shot Thursday evidently by soldiers.

Concern over relief workers’ safety was heightened by a Belgian report Friday that dozens of Rwandans working for international aid organisations in Kigali were massacred.

Georges Dallemagne, director of the Belgian branch of the charity Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF), said gunmen, believed to be from the presidential guard, had shot and killed the aid workers in front of expatriate staff.

Two major U.S. relief organisations – the Atlanta-based CARE and

Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services – said they wanted to pull out their staff from Rwanda, plagued by tribal tensions between the majority Hutus and minority Tutsis.

They said they were waiting to take “the lead” from the U.S. Embassy about the evacuation. But as of Friday morning the State Department had not announced a plan, a situation one CARE official called “unsettling.”

The CARE country director in Kigali, Steve Wallace, called headquarters to report from home shortly before midnight local time that he heard explosions and sounds of weapons fire. “Fighting, animosity and violence have reached a different level,” he reported.

CARE has nine expatriate staff and 100 Rwandan aid workers helping over half a million people in the country of 7.5 million people, CARE spokeswoman Lisa Swenarski said.

Catholic Relief Services has three

expatriates and at least 15 local staff running projects for a quarter million people, Pat Johns head of the Africa office said.

In New York, a U.N. spokesman said he could not provide an update on thousands of the organisation’s staff in the country since phones and electricity were out there.

The U.N. Security Council renewed for four months the mandate of the 2,131 peacekeepers it now has in Rwanda.

There are also 92 civilian staff working for the U.N. Mission for Assistance to Rwanda, as well as 102 employees of other U.N. agencies and their 114 dependents, according to a list provided by a U.N. spokeswoman in Geneva.

Many of the U.N. staff in Rwanda work in refugee camps taking care of people who fled neighbouring Burundi when tribal massacres followed a coup attempt last October.

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