

Airport attacked as Belgians, refugees flee Kigali

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KIGALI, April 14 (Reuter) - Mortar bombs slammed into Kigali airport on Thursday as Belgian forces left before a rebel ultimatum, gunmen massacred wounded civilians and a tide of tribal slaughter raged into a second week.

A total of 10 mortar rounds hit taxiways and the perimeter of the international airport while the last Belgian troops were pulling out. U.N. officers said they believed rebels unleashed the bombardment.

The mortars exploded in balls of black smoke and shrapnel only a few hundred metres (yards) from a plane where Belgian troops were loading light tanks at the airport, held jointly by U.N. and Rwandan troops.

Three of the mortars screamed in while what Belgian officers said was the last planeload of 40 foreign passport-holders and journalists to leave the blood-drenched capital was boarding.

The U.N.-chartered plane left the chaotic capital safely with more than 10 journalists aboard shortly before dusk.

Many of the Rwandans wept during the flight to Nairobi, mourning killed relatives and reliving the horror of their escape from the city. Others simply stared in silence, too shocked to speak.

"Twenty-three members of my family in Kigali were killed," said a woman holding her three children. "It is a catastrophe."

French Defence Minister Francois Leotard said the mortar fire delayed the pullout of the last 40 of 500 French soldiers sent to Rwanda to help evacuate foreigners, but the men would be gone as soon as possible.

The foreign journalists were escorted in a convoy across the city to the airport by a U.N. convoy including an armoured car from the Hotel Des Mille Collines following a news conference there by U.N. forces commander Brigadier-General Rome Dallaire.

Officials of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said they suspended operations to evacuate casualties after armed civilians at a roadblock in the capital stopped an ICRC vehicle and dragged out six wounded civilians inside.

They then shot them dead in front of ICRC staff.

In Geneva, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said at least 30 Rwandan Red Cross workers were killed in the fighting in Rwanda and the toll could rise.

“The workers were all killed as they helped families, friends and strangers while the wave of violence swept through the capital,” the IFRC Red Cross said in a statement.

Dallaire, commander of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR), said he did not know who fired the mortars but he would tell both sides it was not in their interests to do so.

Dallaire said he was shuttling between both sides – the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) and the government – and was keeping the U.N. open as a conduit for negotiations.

“It will be a lot easier when both sides come to a state when they can come and meet, even if it’s not about peace...hopefully soon we will get together,” he said.

“There are massacres of civilians in the city and in the country. Most of them are being carried out by militiamen helped by government forces,” said an aid official, who declined to be identified.

He said massacres still under way on Thursday were centred in the slum area of Nyamirambo in Kigali and the Bugasere area to the southwest and the western port of Kibuye on Lake Kivu.

Heavy fighting between the army and RPF rebels broke out at dawn and raged on for much of the day despite heavy showers.

Belgium, the only Western country with forces still in the remote central African state, said it had decided to withdraw its contingent of U.N. peacekeepers and paratroops.

An RPF ultimatum said foreign troops sent to evacuate their own citizens must be out by midnight local time (2200 GMT).

Aid agencies said tens of thousands of refugees were streaming into neighbouring Tanzania, Burundi, Uganda and Zaire. Tens of thousands of people are believed to have perished in a frenzy of slaughter since Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana was killed by a rocket attack on his plane.

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