

Airport attacked as Belgians try to quit Kigali

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KIGALI, April 14 (Reuter) - Mortar fire hit Rwanda's main airport on Thursday as the last Belgian forces prepared to leave before the expiry of a rebel ultimatum to all foreign forces to quit a city traumatised by a week of tribal slaughter.

Witnesses said at least six rounds fired from rebel positions on the edges of the capital Kigali slammed into the international airport, where Belgian paratroops and a handful of remaining expatriates were gathering.

The commander of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR), Canadian Brigadier-General Romeo Dallaire, told a news conference he did not know who fired the mortars but he would tell both sides it was not in their interests to do so.

"We are going to try to convince them it is not in their interests to attack the airport," he told journalists at a local hotel.

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.

Aid workers said it was not clear whether it was still possible to fly out or whether the only way out of the blood-drenched capital was by land to Bujumbura, capital of neighbouring Burundi.

"It's a general massacre, there are massacres going on all over the city and the country. The army is massacring, homes are being burned down, the lot," said one aid worker.

He said the slum areas of Nyamirambo and Bugasere in the southwest and southeast of the capital where rebels have infiltrated were out of control.

Heavy fighting between regular army units and rebels of the RPF broke out around dawn for the second day running.

Belgium, the only western country with forces still in the remote central African state, wants to comply with an RPF ultimatum which said foreign troops sent to evacuate their own citizens must be out by midnight local time (2200 GMT).

A total of 16 Belgians, 10 of them U.N. peacekeepers, have been killed in the violence raging in their former colony, one of the poorest and smallest countries

in the world.

Dallaire said he would recommend that UNAMIR stay behind in Rwanda if security guarantees were given by both the RPF and government forces, although he said the team would be weaker without the Belgians.

“UNAMIR without the Belgians was short of equipment,” he said.

Overnight on Wednesday Belgian paratroops protecting the French school evacuation point in central Kigali pulled out. A mob of about 100 looters moved in to grab possessions left by foreigners.

Dawn brought more terror to a city torn apart in seven days of tribal carnage sparked by last Wednesday’s killing of Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana.

Tens of thousands are believed to have perished since a rocket attack on his plane in which the president of neighbouring Burundi, Cyprien Ntaryamira, also died as they returned from regional peace talks in Tanzania.

Aid agencies said tens of thousands of refugees were streaming into neighbouring Tanzania, Burundi, Uganda and Zaire.

They said up to 14,000 refugees had poured in to Zaire alone.

At the compound of the International Red Cross, staff barricaded the main entrances and windows with bags of European Union rice – donated to help hungry refugees devastated by three years of civil war.

Many expatriate staff wept openly, unable to respond to a stream of telephone calls from some 120 local staff trapped in their houses and fearing the arrival of the death squads. They said they had heard several local staff were already dead.

Red Cross officials said too many neighbourhoods were now no-go areas with terrified local people slaughtering anyone they did not recognise.

In Brussels, Belgian Foreign Minister Willy Claes said on Thursday that Belgium had also decided to withdraw its contingent of United Nations peacekeepers from Rwanda.

“The Belgian blue helmets will stay under no circumstances,” Claes told a news conference. “No matter what the decision of the (U.N.) Security Council may be, they will not continue to take part in the (U.N. operation).”

The RPF denied a U.N. report it had agreed to a ceasefire with representatives of a rump government.

“We are not going to negotiate a ceasefire with anyone,” RPF spokesman Wilson Rutayisire told a Reuter reporter at the rebels’ base of Mulindi north of Kigali.

RPF radio added the rebels would talk only to those who had distanced themselves from the “clique of killers”.

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