

U.N. says rebels captured swathe of north Rwanda

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NAIROBI, April 21 (Reuter) - U.N. peacekeepers said on Thursday rebels had captured a large swathe of northern Rwanda and government forces appeared to be losing slowly in the blood-soaked capital.

Awaiting orders from New York on whether all U.N. troops should pull out, U.N. officials said rebel and government forces had verbally agreed to protect refugees in case of a total United Nations withdrawal.

But officers said they expected any order to pull out the remaining 1,600 members of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) would increase bloodshed in Rwanda.

In Geneva the International Committee of the Red Cross said on Thursday it had rarely seen a human tragedy on the scale of massacres in Rwanda where deaths could run into hundreds of thousands.

"Tens, maybe hundreds of thousands killed : the exact number of victims of the massacres that have swept Rwanda over the last two weeks will never be known," the ICRC said in a statement.

An angry U.N. officer in Rwanda said : "We have grave doubts agreements will stop killers invading sanctuaries if we leave but there is little we can do without forces, equipment and a new mandate."

UNAMIR commanders announced the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) captured the key frontline town of Byumba on Tuesday and now held a large slice of northern Rwanda from Kidaho to Gabiro in the northeast.

The civil war and massacres were triggered by the killing of the president of Rwanda when a rocket downed his plane on April 6. An estimated two million people have fled their homes and more than 50,000 sought refuge in four neighbouring countries.

Vowing to smash the Hutu-dominated armed forces to stop the massacres, reinforcements from the 20,000-strong RPF are infiltrating into Kigali every night from their strongholds in the north.

"The RPF is advancing in the north and in Kigali," a U.N. commander told Reuters from Kigali after new clashes in northern suburbs of the city, carved up into thousands of blocks ruled by armed mobs set to kill strangers, including fleeing civilians.

"We see government forces do not seem to be consolidating their position in the city, possibly due to the absence of any direction from the high command. It's a fairly bad performance.

"But we do not expect an imminent army collapse and still expect fighting to continue for days or perhaps a week or so."

Intelligence reports said the army high command left Kigali on Wednesday for a meeting with the interim government, which fled to the town of Gityrama to the southwest last week, but the scheduled talks were delayed and only some commanders returned.

"We do not think all government forces are involved in the fighting. Some are just sitting tight and watching the situation worsen and we hear some elements of the presidential guard have retreated to (the southern town of) Butare," the officer said.

UNAMIR Executive Director Abdul Kabia told Reuters by telephone the RPF and armed forces agreed verbally on Thursday to guarantee the safety of refugees hiding in areas held by them in the event of a total withdrawal of U.N. forces from Rwanda.

"They also agreed that if refugees do not feel safe in one camp they will be allowed access to another camp," he said. "We have written confirmation from the RPF and await the same from the armed forces."

Kabia denied an allegation from Rwanda's ambassador to Zaire that three Belgian U.N. soldiers shot down the president's plane on April 6. "The Belgians at the airport only saw flares fired at the aircraft but don't know where they came from," he said.

Three hundred Belgian U.N. peacekeepers, including some who burned their blue berets in disgust at the U.N.'s inability to end the carnage and stop the killing of 10 of their comrades, left Rwanda on Tuesday followed by 200 Ghanaians on Wednesday.

Belgium has pulled out of what was a 2,500-strong force sent to Rwanda to help implement a peace pact last year. Other units have been leaving this week to avoid being caught in crossfire.

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