

UN puts off sending aid planes to Kigali

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GENEVA, April 22 (Reuter) - The United Nations on Friday called off two planned flights carrying emergency medical aid to Kigali, citing poor security around the airport of the Rwandan capital, U.N. officials said.

The decision to postpone the flights until Saturday was taken by the U.N. Assistance Mission for Rwanda, known as UNAMIR, according to a Geneva spokeswoman of the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF).

One is a C-130 Hercules aircraft, provided by Canada's Royal Airforce, carrying five metric tonnes of UNICEF medical supplies and dry biscuits.

The other plane, also to depart from Nairobi, would have aboard a three-member U.N. mission to assess urgent needs in Kigali and outlying areas, as well as eight tonnes of medicines.

"The two flights were not able to take off today because of the security situation at Kigali airport," UNICEF spokeswoman Marie Heuze told Reuters. "They will leave on Saturday morning."

"UNAMIR took the decision, they are the ones directing flights and landings in Kigali," she added.

The Security Council on Friday unanimously voted to cut down its UNAMIR peacekeeping force to 270 troops from the roughly 2,000-strong force there prior to the shooting down of the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi on April 6.

Hundreds of thousands may have died in massacres since then.

The assessment team is being led by the U.N. Department for Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), and is composed of one DHA staff member from New York and two UNICEF employees.

A DHA statement warned on Thursday : "The possibility of epidemics occurring in Kigali is increasing as disposal of corpses becomes overwhelming."

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has said it would be a mistake for the U.N. forces to pull out, adding it had rarely witnessed carnage on such a scale.

The ICRC has 30 delegates in Rwanda, but due to continued fighting has been able to treat only 600 wounded.

Meanwhile, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said on Friday that 16,870 people had been killed in nine villages around Cyangugu, in southwestern Rwanda, during two weeks of inter-ethnic fighting.

"The massacres were indescribable. Most killed were men and children," a UNHCR spokesman told Reuters.

UNHCR also said that 90,000 people had fled Rwanda for four neighbouring countries, nearly doubling the number in just two days.

The agency said the new figure included 50,000 Burundis who have returned to their homeland since the presidents of the two countries were killed when their plane was shot down on April 6. In addition, 12,000 Rwandans have crossed over into Burundi.

“About 150 Rwandan refugees have been treated for machete and gun shot wounds in northern Burundi,” UNHCR spokesman Ron Redmond told the same briefing in Geneva.

There are also 18,000 refugees registered in Tanzania, about 5,500 in Uganda and 4,600 in Zaire, according to the UNHCR.

At least 27 refugees were killed trying to cross from Rwanda into Zaire, according to the agency.

UNHCR also expressed concern for nearly 6,000 people being held by police and militia in a stadium in Cyangugu. “The situation appears desperate, they have no food or water,” an agency spokesman told Reuters.

“About 150 of the people being held in the stadium in Cyangugu have machete wounds,” he added. “They have been attacked, obviously, in the stadium.”

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