

Rwandan rebels declare unilateral ceasefire

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Reuters, April 23, 1994

ARUSHA, Tanzania, April 23 (Reuter) - Rwandan rebels on Saturday declared a unilateral ceasefire in their war with government forces following the deaths of an estimated 100,000 people in more than two weeks of fighting and ethnic slaughter.

"The international community sees this as a way of stopping the massacres, so we have obliged," Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) secretary-general Theogene Rudasingwa said.

Rudasingwa told Reuters of the ceasefire, which is to begin at midnight (2100 GMT) on Monday, just hours before peace talks were to start with the government side in the north Tanzanian town of Arusha.

The United States had on Friday called on the warring sides to agree to an immediate ceasefire and said it was prepared to help efforts to arrange a political settlement of their dispute.

But Rudasingwa, the chief rebel delegate, doubted the government, which independent observers blame for most of the massacres, could fulfill its ceasefire conditions.

Human rights workers estimate that 100,000 people have been killed and two million people displaced in fighting since President Juvenal Habyarimana was killed in a rocket attack on his plane on April 6.

The RPF says it is in a position of strength after capturing a swath of the north and a substantial portion of the capital.

Aid workers say the killings were continuing in southern towns. It appeared most of the victims are from the Tutsi tribe, associated with the RPF, or supporters of opposition parties.

Government comment was not available on the ceasefire declaration which was signed by RPF Chairman Colonel Alexis Kanyarengwe in rebel headquarters in northern Rwanda. U.N. officials attending the talks had not been told of the RPF move.

Terms to the ceasefire included :

- control of killings by government forces in their areas of control within 96 hours of the ceasefire deadline
- monitoring of the ceasefire by 270 U.N. observers still in Rwanda following the cut in peacekeeping forces by the Security Council
- negotiations on implementation of the nine-month-old peace accord which

was supposed to end the civil war and establish an all-party transitional government

- exclusion from peace talks of those linked to killings
- an international tribunal to investigate and punish those responsible for killing the president and carrying out massacres
- joint control of Kigali airport by rebels and government forces and creation of internationally supervised safe corridors for delivery of aid and safe passage of civilians.

Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Secretary-General Salim Ahmed Salim welcomed the news of the RPF ceasefire declaration.

“Much will depend on what happens on the ground but a ceasefire would be an important step towards ending the carnage and mayhem,” he told Reuters on arrival in Arusha.

On Friday Salim blasted the U.N. announcement that it was evacuating most of its 2,500 observers and troops from the Rwandan capital Kigali due to the resumption of fighting.

“When things get worse, when things become more miserable, it is incomprehensible to us that the U.N. presence should be reduced,” Salim said.

A U.N. spokesman in Kigali said 1,000 peacekeepers were due to leave the capital by Saturday night, leaving about 600 troops who would be reduced within days to 270.

But U.N. special envoy Jacques-Roger Booh-Booh said he had been given authority to hold back 1,000 mainly Ghanaian troops who had been evacuated to Nairobi to send back to Kigali if a ceasefire was reached.

“This is the last chance for the Rwandan people,” he said.

U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) spokesman Moctar Gueye told reporters the U.N. was deeply concerned about the safety of 12,000 Rwandan civilians under its protection who would be defenceless if they left.

He said the U.N. wanted agreement from the warring parties on the handover of Kigali airport to the U.N., the burial of corpses left in the open – which the U.N. numbers at 20,000 in Kigali alone – joint RPF-government security patrols to restore order, and guarantees for food distribution to the needy.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said a medical convoy with 20 staff had managed to get through to the embattled Rwandan capital of Kigali from Burundi late on Friday.

A U.N. military official said small arms fire erupted in Kigali early on Saturday but eased later.

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