

French troops move into Kigali, rebels advance

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Reuters, April 9, 1994

KIGALI, April 9 (Reuter) – French troops moved into central Kigali on Saturday at the start of an international mission to save foreign nationals trapped in Rwanda by tribal bloodletting and civil war.

A delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) told Reuters Western diplomats were contacting people by radio and urging those wishing to leave and willing to take the risk to meet at several designated assembly points.

Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels north of Kigali, meanwhile, launched an offensive, vowing to capture the Rwandan capital and end bloodshed in which relief workers say several thousand people may already have died.

Reuters reporters with the RPF reported heavy fighting along a frontline which snakes through the north and northeast of the remote central African state, where the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi tribes have a history of bloody rivalry.

“Heavy shelling started early this morning, the rebels are now advancing on three fronts,” correspondent Buchizya Mseteka told Reuters in Nairobi by satellite telephone from rebel headquarters in Mulindi.

He said the sound of heavy artillery pierced the early morning air of

the mountainous region, until recently known only to the outside world as one of the last homes of the rare mountain gorilla.

In Kigali itself, where parliament speaker Venat Sindikubwabo announced the formation of a stop-gap government, savage fighting which broke out after the assassination of the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi had abated but a ceasefire agreement reported by the U.N. did not appear to be holding.

Colonel Luc Marchal, commander of Belgian forces serving with a 2,500-strong U.N. mission already in Rwanda, said rebels and the armed forces were still fighting and that sporadic automatic gunfire could be heard.

Rwanda and Burundi have a bloody history of tribal rivalry. Tens of thousands of Hutu and Tutsi have died in recurring bouts of ethnic bloodletting.

The RPF offensive was launched within hours of a statement by its military leader Major-General Paul Kagame, who denounced the interim administration.

He appealed to all Rwandans to help fight what he described as a clique which included the presidential guard, the former president’s ruling party and other hardline political parties from the Hutu people.

President Juvenal Habyarimana and his Burundi counterpart Cyprien Ntaryimira, both Hutus, were killed in a rocket attack on their plane on Wednesday as they returned from a regional peace summit in Tanzania.

The RPF, which invaded from Uganda in 1990 and is supported mainly by the Tutsi, denied responsibility for the slayings which sparked an orgy of revenge killings and signalled the end of a ceasefire which halted the civil war last August.

Parliament speaker Sindikubwabo said on state radio he had taken over as interim president after consultations with other political groups.

Sindikubwabo, a Habyarimana ally, said his government only wanted to restore order and wanted to contact the RPF with a view to setting up a transitional government within six weeks.

The rebels rejected his overtures. "The RPF has irreversibly decided to fight this clique... let us work together to find and bring to book these murderers," Kagame's statement, broadcast repeatedly on rebel radio, said. "Anyone standing in its (the RPF's) way will be considered an accomplice of the murderers and dealt with accordingly," it added ominously.

Rwanda is one of Africa's smallest and poorest states.

Hundreds of people have been reported killed since Wednesday, including political leaders, aid workers, nuns, priests, ordinary Rwandans and Belgian U.N. peacekeepers.

Almost 300 French paratroops flew in to secure Kigali airport before dawn. France said it was sending troops for the possible evacuation of some 600 nationals living in Rwanda.

Belgium said it had sent elite paratroops units to help with the eva-

cuation from its former colony, where 10 Belgian U.N. peacekeepers died on Thursday trying to save slain Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, a Hutu.

Military and government sources said an advance detachment of paratroops, including C-130 transport planes packed with military equipment, had left Belgium for Kigali.

A U.S. Navy spokesman in Bonn said U.S. Marines and planes were on their way to neighbouring Burundi to help. The United States has told its 230 citizens in Rwanda to leave.

Belgian Deputy Prime Minister Elio di Rupo said the evacuation would take several days. Belgium has 1,500 nationals in Rwanda.

"The idea was that we would go in after the French had secured the airport," said one source, who asked not to be identified.

U.S. sources said there were two possible evacuation plans for U.S. embassy staff.

There are still U.S. military helicopters on ships off Kenya following the end last month of the U.S. mission to Somalia. "These could take part in a joint Marine-military expedition," a U.S. military source said.

The second option, the sources said, was to use U.N. World Food Programme helicopters in western Tanzania helping feed hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing ethnic violence.

In addition to U.S. embassy staff there are some 150-200 U.S. missionaries and teachers in Rwanda.

Relief workers said Burundi, where up to 50,000 people died in violence following the October assassination of that country's first democratically elected Hutu president, was calm.

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