

Half a million people flee as government prepares to meet rebels

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KIGALI, Feb 17 (AFP) - About 500,000 people have fled conflict in Rwanda, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said Wednesday, as Prime Minister Dismas Nsengiyaremye prepared to hold talks with rebels.

Red Cross officials in Geneva said 350,000 people had left the Ruhengeri, Byumba and Ngarama districts to move further south, while 150,000 other local people had also taken to the roads.

Rwandan officials on Wednesday said the cabinet decided at a meeting Tuesday to hold talks with the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPR) at Dar es Salaam in Tanzania at an undisclosed date.

The cabinet accused the FPR, made up mainly of the Tutsi minority ethnic group, of systematically murdering innocent families after breaching a ceasefire on February 8.

The rebels on Tuesday shelled the northwestern town of Ruhengeri and

captured two new districts in the northeastern Byumba region, informed sources said.

The ICRC has evacuated 50 injured and sick people from the battle zone to hospital in Kigali, ICRC sources said. A surgical team from the ICRC flew into the capital on Sunday aboard a Hercules transport plane which was also carrying 10 tonnes of medical material and medicines.

In spite of logistic problems caused by the mass displacement of people in the densely populated central African highland nation, the ICRC had managed to get some supplies through to people without food or shelter.

At the planned talks, the government delegation will also include Interior Minister Faustin Munyazesa, Labour and Social Affairs Minister Landoald Ndasinwa and Agriculture Minister Frederic Nzamurambaho, officials said.

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