

# Heavy fighting reported near northern Rwandan town

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KIGALI, March 3 (AFP) - Heavy fighting reportedly broke out between rebels and government forces Wednesday near the northwestern Rwandan town of Ruhengeri, diplomats said in the capital, Kigali.

The fighting near the beleaguered government-held hometown of President Juvenal Habyarimana came on the eve of peace talks in the Tanzanian city of Dar es Salaam.

Meanwhile distant mortar fire was heard in Kigali on Wednesday evening.

It was unclear where the firing took place, but diplomats estimated that it was about 30 kilometres (18 miles) away.

"The rebels want a military advance to step up pressure on Habyarimana at the negotiations," said a senior Western diplomat.

The talks were due to start Wednesday. They were postponed until Thursday because the leader

of the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), Alex Kanyarengwe, was unable to reach Dar es Salaam in time from Bujumbura, where he was attending talks with opposition parties, according to a rebel representative who is a member of a ceasefire monitoring team based in Kigali.

The rebels cut the road between Ruhengeri and Kigali after they launched a major offensive on February 8, violating a seven-month ceasefire. Each side has accused each other of breaking the agreement.

Diplomatic sources and relief workers here said government troops seemed to be finding it increasingly difficult to hold Ruhengeri, 64 kilometres (40 miles) northwest of Kigali.

Some rebel units are only 30 kilometres (18 miles) north of the capital. But government forces hold other areas further north.

A million people, almost one seventh of Rwanda's population, have

fled the fighting. Hundreds have been reported killed, mostly civilians. This tiny central African state from neighbouring Uganda 28 months ago.

The rebels are mostly refugees of the minority Tutsi tribe who invaded more AFP AFP SEQN-0441