

Rwanda rebels halt offensive, Belgian troops land

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KIGALI, April 10 (Reuter) – Rwandan rebels agreed a ceasefire with government forces on Sunday and halted their drive towards the anarchic capital, Kigali, Belgium's military commander in Rwanda reported.

Belgium landed fresh troops at Kigali airport to help its U.N. peacekeeping contingent rescue 1,500 Belgian residents, the largest Western community in Rwanda and the foreign group most at risk in a four-day tribal bloodbath.

It was unclear whether a rebel-army truce would check the slaughter of civilians in Kigali where bodies – mainly those of the rebels' Tutsi kinfolk – have been seen by foreigners lying in piles and overflowing morgues.

The Belgians' arrival, reported by BRTN radio in Brussels, followed an agreement with an interim Rwandan government formed on Saturday.

France has sent 460 troops into Kigali and flown out two planeloads of its citizens. But it shared the airport with local soldiers who refused until late on Sunday to let in forces from Belgium, Rwanda's former colonial ruler.

Colonel Luc Marchal, commander of Belgian troops in a 2,500-strong U.N. peacekeeping force, told Brussels television : "At 10 o'clock this morning, there was a ceasefire and it seems to be holding".

"The two sides agreed to a ceasefire," he said. "There is a certain stabilisation."

The tiny, overpopulated state in the heart of Africa plunged into anarchy when its president was killed by a rocket that shot down his plane on Wednesday.

Neighbouring Tanzania broadcast a report on Sunday of a parallel outbreak of tribal fighting in Burundi, whose head of state died in the same plane. But other sources said the Burundi capital, Bujumbura, was calm.

Burundi is the main escape route for Westerners fleeing Rwanda by road, including almost all Americans in Kigali.

Rwanda and Burundi have both been racked for decades by recurring conflict between the majority Hutu tribe and the warlike Tutsi.

The Rwanda Patriotic Front rebels, who hold territory north of the capital and had been promised a role in government under a peace agreement now in ruins, are mainly Tutsi.

Soldiers and gangs of youths went on the rampage against Tutsi in the capital after the death of President President Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu.

The rebels also have a force of 600 men stationed in Kigali's parliament building and pinned down by government troops.

Rebel officers in the north told Reuter correspondent Aidan Hartley on Sunday morning they had sent 4,000 men to rescue their force in the capital but met strong resistance from government troops on the way.

There was no confirmation from the rebels that a ceasefire was agreed later in the day.

Tanzania, the eastern neighbour of both Rwanda and Burundi, reported that 570 people had fled across the border from Burundi to escape Tutsi attacks on Hutu residential areas.

But Pierre Harzee of the Belgian wing of Medecins sans Frontieres, told Belga news agency that Bujumbura's

main Hutu suburb was calm on Sunday.

Burundi's army – a mirror image of Rwanda's – is drawn mainly from the Tutsi minority.

Mutinous troops opposed to a transition from Tutsi-dominated military rule to democracy murdered the country's first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, last October.

Up to 50,000 people have died in waves of bloodshed that swept Bujumbura in the months since Ndadaye's murder. His successor Cyprien Ntaryamira, who died in the president's Rwandan plane, was also a Hutu.

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