

Rwanda peace talks bog down over size of joint army

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DAR ES SALAAM, March 22 (AFP) - The Rwandan government and its rebel foes were locked in a dispute Monday over the size of a joint army they agreed to form during talks aimed at ending a two-year civil war, officials said.

The government, which has a 35,000-strong army drawn mainly from the majority Hutu tribe, wants a force of 15,000 to 17,000 soldiers.

But the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) insists on a smaller army of 13,000.

The rebels claim to have 15,000 fighters, mainly from the minority Tutsi tribe. But military analysts and diplomats in the region estimate that their force is smaller than 10,000.

Diplomats here said the RPF

wanted to keep the army to 13,000 so that Hutu soldiers would not outnumber Tutsis. "The RPF fears future reprisals based on ethnic animosity," said an African diplomat observing the meeting in the northern Tanzanian town of Arusha.

Human rights groups said more than 300 Tutsi civilians were massacred in northern Rwanda in January, allegedly by Hutu supporters of President Juvenal Habyarimana.

The rebels claim that the killings prompted them to attack government forces in February, breaking a seven-month ceasefire in a bid to end the bloodshed. But human rights groups have since accused the rebels themselves of slaughtering civilians.

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