

Rwanda's interim cabinet flees capital as rebels close in

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KIGALI, April 12 (Reuter) - Rwanda's entire cabinet, appointed last week after the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana, fled the embattled capital on Tuesday as rebels tightened their noose on the city, witnesses said.

They said the 19-member interim government led by former parliamentary speaker Venat Theodore Sindikubwabo had fled to Gitarama, a town 40 kms (25 miles) southwest of the capital, as rebel forces of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) closed in.

A receptionist at the city-centre Hotel des Diplomates, where the government was based, said all its members piled into a convoy, with a heavy escort of army soldiers, and drove out of the blood-drenched city.

One lone soldier stood outside the hotel, previously guarded by hundreds.

Sindikubwabo's administration was swiftly rejected by the rebels as "illegitimate" soon after it took over last week following Habyarimana's death in a plane crash believed to have been caused by a rocket attack.

"This (Sindikubwabo's) government has no legitimacy. It is a clique of murderers," RPF commander-in-chief Major-General Paul Kagame said.

On Tuesday, rebel officers said at Mulindi, the RPF bush headquarters 70 kms (50 miles) north of Kigali, that their forces had started encircling the city ready to take it over as soon as foreign troops conducting evacuation operations had left.

They told Reuters two battalions were on the outskirts of Kigali and were waiting to overrun the city's international airport once French and Belgian troops departed later in the day.

"They are expected to take the airport. They will only move once foreign soldiers have left," an RPF commander said.

Asked whether government soldiers in the city said to be made up of four battalions could contain the rebels once foreign troops left, a French commander told Reuters : "They have no chance in hell."

Shortly before the interim government fled, the ambassadors of Belgium, France and Germany were also said to be leaving Kigali.

The entire staff of the Russian embassy in the capital, as well as representatives of the Russian airline Aeroflot and their families, were evacuated to neighbouring Burundi on Tuesday.

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