

The power of hate rules in blood-soaked Kigali

Smerdon, Peter

Reuters, April 14, 1994

KIGALI, April 15 (Reuter) - A billboard on the road to Kigali airport shows black hands grasping a single beer beneath the legend : "The power of love."

The power of hate, fuelled by beer and a mass thirst for blood, now rules the Rwandan capital, transformed into a massive killing ground after the death of the country's president 10 days ago in a rocket attack.

Foreign journalists taken in a U.N.-escorted convoy from the Hotel Des Mille Collines in the city centre to Kigali airport for evacuation on Thursday saw a city tearing itself apart in a frenzy of slaughter.

Government troops and civilians, still respecting the neutrality of foreigners and the United Nations, pulled aside makeshift roadblocks.

As if clinging to the idea that they were doing no real wrong and held no blame, they waved to the U.N. soldiers in the convoy. Some grinned and gave "V for Victory" signs.

But gunmen, roaming the streets in an assortment of looted cars with their doors pulled off to allow them a greater field of fire, passed the convoy sullenly, concentrating on hunting down anyone desperate enough to venture from home.

Those unfortunate to be spotted by the gunmen, or by the beer-drinking mobs armed with clubs, hand grenades, axes and iron bars loitering on virtually every street corner, stood little chance of escape.

The bodies of about 10 people lay sprawled in a pile on the side of a dirt road near the airport. Some single bodies, bloated and stinking after several days, had been overlooked by the daily clean-up teams of convicts.

The corpses of other men, women and children shot or hacked to death near army and mob checkpoints overnight and seen by journalists in the morning had been whisked away by the afternoon.

Witnesses say thousands more dead remain hidden in churches and homes where they were slaughtered as government forces and Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels fought for control of the capital of what was once dubbed "The Switzerland of Africa."

With food running short after more than a week of chaos, lines of barefoot men, women and children carried off sacks of maize looted from a warehouse during a lull in the fighting.

Scores of cars abandoned by expatriates at the French school on the edge of Kigali's city centre were looted on Thursday by a mob of more than 100 people escorted by a Rwandan gendarme toting a rifle.

U.N. officials estimate that up to 3,000 rebels have now infiltrated into the capital to link up with 600 already there. None could be seen from the airport road.

Government troops stood guard at the airport entrance while heavily-armed Belgium paratroops stood in the terminal building.

Mortar fire slammed into the airport perimeter as the journalists and about 40 refugees boarded a U.N.-chartered aircraft. Armoured troop carriers and other vehicles careened around the tarmac, speeding to avoid being hit by incoming fire.

The aircraft left shortly before dusk, taxiing much faster than normal past the spot where the shells had crashed in earlier and then speeding into its take-off run.

Near the end of the runway it passed over the wreckage of the plane which was shot down, killing President Juvenal Habyarimana and the president of neighbouring Burundi.

The United Nations says it is still unclear who killed the two presidents, and sparked the bloodbath in Rwanda, as its troops have still not reached the site.

(c) Reuters Limited 1994