

Rwandan army, rebels meet; refugees blocked

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NAIROBI, April 16 (Reuter) - Rwandan refugees fleeing fighting in the capital Kigali and inter-tribal massacres were trapped on the fringes of their blood-soaked country on Saturday.

The rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), which held its first meeting with the army late on Friday to discuss a possible ceasefire, made an appeal for international aid for thousands of refugees.

"Thousands of people are now taking refuge in RPF-controlled areas and the RPF calls upon humanitarian organisations to provide emergency aid, especially food, shelter and medicine," RPF radio Muhabura said on Saturday.

A U.N. spokesman said Rwandan border guards had closed the frontier with Zaire, halting the flood of refugees fleeing ethnic reprisals.

Hubert Edongo, regional representative for central Africa for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said around 10,000 refugees had fled into the Goma region of eastern Zaire, but there was no saying how many were now blocked at the border.

"We expect to see many more than 10,000 coming across if the border is reopened," he said.

Edongo confirmed reports Zaire had granted political asylum to 160 Rwandan government officials and their families who fled to the Burundi capital of Bujumbura after the two countries' presidents were killed when rockets hit their plane.

Many of the refugees are members of Rwanda's minority Tutsi tribe, but they have also included Zaireans who had settled in Rwanda and a sprinkling of Belgian, German, French, Canadian, Dutch and British expatriates.

The refugees are being lodged in convents, hostels, schools and makeshift camps as international aid agencies rush tents and blankets to the area.

Western diplomats said Kenya had refused entry to some 350 Rwandans evacuated to Nairobi.

"We have pushed for the Rwandans to be admitted since late Thursday but as you can see they are still here (in Nairobi airport)," said a diplomat who declined to be named.

Kenyan Information Ministry permanent secretary David Andere told Reuters the Rwandans were not being refused entry.

Kenya already hosts some 300,000 refugees - mainly Somalis.

Fighting for control of the capital Kigali continued into Saturday. Thousands of people have died in an orgy of ethnic violence between the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi tribes.

Representatives of the Rwandan army and rebel forces held their first face-to-face meeting at a secret location late on Friday to explore terms for a ceasefire, the U.N. said.

“The meeting was arranged by the U.N. Secretary-General’s special representative Jacques-Roger Booh Booh and held behind closed doors. It explored conditions for a total ceasefire,” the U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) said in a statement sent to Reuters in Nairobi.

There was no immediate word whether the meeting made progress. The RPF, which draws its support mainly from Tutsis, has previously said it could not discuss an end to fighting with “a clique of murderers”.

A French television station reported Kigali airport had fallen to RPF forces early on Saturday but the UNAMIR office in New York said U.N., Belgian and French forces were still in control.

U.N. officials said that despite a week of fighting, neither the army nor the rebels seemed in control of Kigali.

About 3,600 rebels have infiltrated the city but government troops, including men of the presidential guard, were still resisting fiercely, UNAMIR officials said.

In New York on Friday, the Security Council said the main priority in Rwanda was establishing a ceasefire.

The U.N. made no decision on the future of the 2,500-strong UNAMIR, set up last year to help implement a peace pact signed last August in Tanzania aimed at ending a three-year civil war.

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