

Rebel reinforcements push on Kigali despite talks

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NAIROBI, April 22 (Reuter) - Rebel reinforcements advanced on government forces in the beleaguered Rwandan capital of Kigali after both sides agreed to peace talks and the U.N. considered withdrawing all but a few hundred of peacekeepers.

United Nations officials in Kigali said Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) reinforcements were heading for the capital after they were reported to have captured the town of Rwamagana, about 25 miles (40 km) to the east.

The officials, speaking by telephone, said they had fresh reports of massacres of civilians near the southern towns of Butare, Gityrama and Gikondoro but had no figures for the dead.

Hundreds of thousands of people are feared to have been slaughtered since the presidents of Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi were killed when their plane was shot down near Kigali on April 6.

In New York, U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali recommended on Thursday the Security Council either increase U.N. forces in Rwanda by several thousand or reduce them to about 270.

Security Council members said privately the force, originally 2,500 strong, would probably be cut to 270 with a provision for an early review in case a ceasefire was established in the civil war.

In a report to the council, expected to adopt a resolution on Friday, Boutros-Ghali also gave a third option of completing withdrawing the U.N. Assistance Mission For Rwanda (UNAMIR) but rejected it outright.

Aid agencies have said a total U.N. withdrawal from Rwanda would put at risk thousands of displaced people who rely on the U.N. presence to deter roaming gunmen.

U.N. officers shared the agency concerns and were worried that even if 270 peacekeepers stayed out of the 1,570 now in Rwanda after the withdrawal earlier this week of some units to avoid being hit by crossfire and the whole Belgian contingent.

“With that number (270), we simply cannot accompany convoys, monitor any ceasefire or investigate problems as well as take over control of the airport, as is planned,” an officer said.

“A force of 270 would also have a lot of manpower problems if it was required to stay near places where the refugees are.”

But a senior U.N. official in Kigali said he had no evidence to support a British Broadcasting Corporation report that thousands of displaced people in the city's main stadium were threatening to commit suicide if all U.N. forces pulled out.

"The people at stadium have expressed their great concern at the news that the United Nations was leaving but none of them have threatened suicide," said UNAMIR's executive director, Abdul Kabia.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which said it had rarely seen a human tragedy on the scale of the massacres, urged U.N. peacekeepers to stay in the country, now bordering on famine.

In neighbouring Burundi, state-radio said President Sylvestre Ntibantunganya held a meeting of ministers and representatives of the security forces and local government to find a lasting solution to sporadic violence in the past week.

The radio said fighting was continuing in the capital of Bujumbura. Diplomats fear Burundi, which like Rwanda has a long history of bloodshed between its Hutu majority and Tutsi minority, may soon explode.

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