

U.N. troops quit Rwanda despite massacre fears

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NAIROBI, April 22 (Reuter) - More than 400 U.N. peacekeepers flew out of Rwanda on Friday, slashing U.N. forces in the chaotic Central African state to the bone. Critics say the U.N. is leaving thousands of civilians at risk of tribal slaughter.

Ferried from Kigali to the Kenyan capital Nairobi by two Canadian C-130 Hercules, many of the peacekeeper then headed back to their home countries.

"We are trying to reach a maximum of 1,000 out of Rwanda by Saturday but had problems with the planes," Abdul Kabia, executive director of UNAMIR, the U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda, told Reuters by telephone from Kigali.

"Some we contracted do not appear to be insured for war risks."

The U.N. Security Council decided on Thursday night that UNAMIR, originally a force of 2,500, should be cut to 270 after more than two weeks of massacre and civil war in which perhaps hundreds of thousands have been killed.

Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said he concluded there was no prospect of a ceasefire agreement soon between the government and the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF).

The 270 to remain in Kigali are the force commander, the representative of the U.N. secretary-general, 150 infantrymen, some military observers and a few civilian staff.

"The major aspects of our new mandate are to continue our contacts with both parties to arrive at a ceasefire, to continue providing assistance for the resumption of humanitarian assistance and to monitor the situation and report," Kabia said.

Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Secretary-General Salim Ahmed Salim accused the United Nations of abandoning the people of Rwanda because of a lack of concern for an African tragedy.

Salim's statement added to criticism from African diplomats at what they see as a double standard in reducing U.N. forces in Rwanda and bolstering U.N. involvement in the former Yugoslavia.

Aid agencies complained the pullout puts at risk thousands of civilians sheltering in areas where a U.N. presence deterred gunmen from entering sanctuaries and massacring those inside.

"We are outraged at this short-sighted, callous decision," said David Bryer, director of the British charity Oxfam, adding thousands of civilians would lose what little safety they had.

“We are going to continue providing the utmost assistance and protection to the refugees with the resources we have,” said UNAMIR’s Kabia, adding U.N. troops would continue to be based at Kigali’s Amahoro Stadium where 5,000 people are sheltering.

“That is why we are constantly in touch with the warring parties – to get their help and understanding to help us provide the necessary protection to the refugees,” he said.

“Even if we had bigger forces, in a war environment like this you have to get the understanding and agreement of the warring parties on who is not going to be a target,” he added.

Infantrymen from Bangladesh and Ghana – the two largest contingents in UNAMIR – flew home from Nairobi, where only UNAMIR military observers will be based in case of a ceasefire.

“We are trying to reach agreement with the countries of those going home that their services are temporarily suspended but they will be made available to us if it proves necessary,” Kabia said.

U.N. officers reported sporadic fighting in Kigali in the morning and said rebel reinforcements were seen advancing by road on the capital from Rwamagana, about 40 km (25 miles) to the east.

They said RPF units were consolidating positions in the city, where most streets were deserted and shops remained shut.

“It looks like the government and RPF are fighting it out,” UNAMIR commander Brigadier-General Romeo Dallaire told Reuters.

Dallaire said he hoped a ceasefire could be arranged at peace talks from Saturday in the northern Tanzanian town of Arusha brokered by Tanzania’s President Ali Hassan Mwinyi.

The rebels insist that they will only talk to the Rwandan army and not an interim government which fled Kigali last week.

Dallaire said massacres had continued unabated in the southern town of Butare but he gave no figures for the dead.

Two planned flights carrying emergency medical aid to Kigali from Nairobi were postponed from Friday to Saturday because of what was said to be poor security around the Rwandan capital’s airport.

Kabia said UNAMIR was still negotiating with both government and rebel forces for Kigali airport to be declared neutral territory so neither party would attempt to seize it by force.

The International Committee of the Red Cross managed however to send a medical convoy from neighbouring Burundi to Kigali.

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