

Rotting corpses and fighting show Rwandan agony

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NAIROBI, April 24 (Reuter) - A hundred rotting corpses and a tiny girl fainting with fear provided grim evidence of just one of Rwanda's terrible massacres on Sunday.

Just south of the shell-blasted capital, Kigali, where U.N. officials said rebels and government troops battled overnight and most of Sunday, journalists came across a six-year-old girl hiding among the bodies of other children and their parents.

She pretended to be dead when rebels approached and collapsed from fear when one picked her up and took her to a bush medical post. The gaping machete wound in her neck needed first aid.

The girl, who said she had seen all her family slaughtered, was hiding under a blanket outside of one of the mud huts near the pile of about 100 bodies. Dozens more corpses spilled from hut doorways.

A small baby boy, only months old and still wearing a white sleeping suit, lay dead, spreadeagled on his back with his arms flung out, a few metres (yards) from the main mass of corpses covered with flies.

Survivors of the massacre said they were among up to 2,000 Tutsi civilians who were stopped on April 17 by government troops as they were trying to reach Amahoro stadium in Kigali. Allied militiamen forced them to climb Nyanza hill.

"My wife had a child on her back and she was cut because she could not walk quickly," a factory worker, wounded in an arm and leg, told Reuters Television from inside territory controlled by the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF).

"We were beaten. Everyone was trying to hide in the group so they would not be beaten or cut with machetes. When we reached Nyanza they told us to sit and we sat. We were almost more than 2,000.

"We sat there. They (militiamen) said to get the grenades ready. No one was moving. We were surrounded by the militias. And then they threw the grenades..."

Like many of the other massacres in the pitiless war mainly between the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi, no absolute figures will ever be known. Aid workers have spoken of wounded crawling away to escape, then dying alone.

But their agencies estimate 100,000 people have been slaughtered since April 6 - more than 5,500 dead every day.

Two million people have been made homeless since that day when the country erupted over the death of Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana. He and his Burundian counterpart perished when their plane was hit by a rocket.

In the capital on Sunday, U.N. troops evacuated 300 people, mostly civilian refugees but including about 15 U.N. staff and some journalists, from the nearby Meridien Hotel and took them to the King Faisal hospital.

"The hotel was not hit by shells but it was becoming much too dangerous to keep anyone there," said Abdul Kabia, executive director of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR).

An estimated 9,000 refugees are already sheltering under U.N. protection at the King Faisal hospital in addition to 5,000 at the national Amahoro stadium near U.N. headquarters.

A U.N. convoy evacuated 32 foreigners from the International Committee of the Red Cross compound. They were driven to Kigali airport for a flight to Nairobi.

They comprised nine French, 17 Swiss, one Briton, one Pakistani, one Dutch, one Irish, one Canadian and a Norwegian.

Among those evacuated from the Meridien Hotel were members of a U.N. team sent to Kigali to examine the possibility of starting distributing food to civilians trapped in the capital.

Rebels who went to abortive peace talks in Arusha, Tanzania, on Saturday announced a unilateral but conditional ceasefire from midnight (2200 GMT) on Monday. One condition is an end to all killings within 96 hours.

Diplomats said they doubted the government would be able to respond. "The government is in complete disarray. It has a huge problem of coordination and communication between its ministers in Gityrama and its forces in the field," one diplomat said.

The government fled to Gityrama, about 40 km (25 miles) southwest of Kigali, after rebel forces attacked the capital.

UNAMIR is cutting its forces in Rwanda to the bare bone on orders of the U.N. Security Council, which decided on Thursday only 270 members of the originally 2,500-strong force should remain.

Aid agencies say tens of thousands of civilians will be left without protection after the U.N. pullout.

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