

Fighting rages in Rwanda despite truce call (pictures)

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MUTARA, Rwanda, Feb 13 (AFP) - Rebels and government forces pounded each other with artillery and heavy machine guns in the green hills of north-eastern Rwanda despite calls for a truce.

A tree-covered hillside was in flames behind rebel lines near Mutara, 60 kilometres (36 miles) north-east of the capital Kigali on Friday, after being hit by heavy artillery fire.

Shells boomed and mortars blasted throughout the day Friday, but rebel sources reported a lull Saturday.

Rebels who have gained ground in a major offensive this week dug trenches under cover of dense banana plantations left to grow wild by farmers who have fled the fighting.

Charred helmets and shell casings littered the swampy and mountainous terrain, permeated by the sickly stench of rotting flesh.

Rwandan state radio said more

than half a million people had fled five days of fighting in the north of this tiny central African state.

Reporters who toured parts of the battle zone Friday saw almost no civilians.

Farming has been disrupted by the 28-month bush war which has brought Rwanda's already ailing economy to the brink of collapse. Tea plantations and farms have been abandoned in the lush northern hill country.

The rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) launched the offensive Monday in retaliation for the massacre of more than 300 peasants from the Tutsi tribe which provides most of its fighters, allegedly by government soldiers who are almost all Hutus. The Hutus make up an estimated 80 percent of Rwanda's 7.5 million people.

Government radio said 550,000 people had since fled the fighting in-

cluding 350,000 people already in displaced people's camps forced to flee for the second time since the RPF invaded northern Rwanda from neighbouring Uganda in October 1990.
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