

## Government offers not to move troops, set up neutral zone

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KIGALI, Feb 23 (AFP) - The Rwandan government will maintain its troops in their current positions for a truce with the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), Foreign Minister Boniface Ngulinzira said Monday.

In a statement read on the radio, Ngulinzira said the regular army will abide by a ceasefire all along the frontline.

The government had demanded that the rebels fall back to the lines they held before an offensive this month that has left more than 2,000 dead in the northwestern Ruhengeri district, according to a provisional official toll.

Ngulinzira on Monday pledged that government troops would not advance if the rebels fell back and proposed that the ground cleared be declared a neutral demilitarized zone under the control of a multi-national military observer force.

The truce, initially due to last a week, will be extended until the restoration of ceasefire conditions signed in Arusha, Tanzania, last July, the minister added.

Ngulinzira said the RPF had violated the ceasefire many times in the past week. The mainly Tutsi rebels attacked this month after a massacre of more than 300 people by Hutu supporters of President Juvenal Habyarimana.

Hardliners in the regime oppose an agreement reached in January to bring the rebels into a broad-based transitional government alongside opposition parties. The RFP is formed largely of Tutsis exiled after a revolution in 1959.

A provisional death toll issued during a meeting chaired by Ruhengeri district prefect Sylvestre Bariyanga said more than 2,000 people had been killed and 50,000 taken hostage.

Ngulinzira said peace talks would

resume in Tanzania by March 1 at the latest and called for a joint politico-military commission meeting within 10 days to discuss ceasefire problems.

The Ruhengeri district security council appealed to the International Committee of the Red Cross to help evacuate people who have spent two weeks in forests and banana-groves, facing starvation and disease.

Over the weekend France doubled the number of its troops in Rwanda to 600, stating their role was to protect French nationals. The RPF has accused France of backing government troops and French intelligence says the rebels are supported by Uganda.

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