Heavy fighting resumes as UN readies emergency aid for 10,000

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KIGALI, April 13 (AFP) - Fighting between rebel and government forces rocked the Rwandan capital anew Wednesday as the United Nations sought to forge a truce after a week of ethnic conflict estimated to have killed thousands and created 10,000 refugees.

In Geneva, UN refugee officials prepared to ship emergency food to the 10,000 people they said had been displaced in the latest outbreak of ethnic bloodletting in the eastern African state.

Rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) were trying to capture a police camp in the north of the capital, an official of the UN Mission for Aid to Rwanda said.

Intense gunfire again broke out early in the day in the east, where an RPF battalion is based, but tailed off around midday, the official said.

Clashes also appeared to be going on in the northwest.

Light weapons gunfire seemed to have moved closer to the centre of Kigali which was quiet but tense.

Inside the capital, Hutu militia and civilians manned roadblocks of tree trunks and branches erected in an apparent bid to block the rebels' advance.

A unit of Belgian paratroopers remained in the city, holed up in the French school. The Belgian defence ministry said only 30 Belgian nationals were left in Rwanda on Wednesday, 1,000 having been evacuated by air, 300 by road and another 400 due to arrive in Brussels later Wednesday.

Reports from the airport said Belgian and French paratroopers – about 1,000 men in all – might leave in the evening.

A rebel spokesman late Tuesday gave foreign forces – French, Belgian and Italian – 24 hours to quit or face attack.

The RPF has accused France of

siding with the Hutus, while the government has accused the Belgians of backing the Tutsis, the former overlords when Rwanda was a Belgian colony. The government again Wednesday charged that the UN troops were backing the rebels.

Speaking at the UN in New York on Tuesday, the rebel spokesman said 3,100 rebel troops in Kigali hoped to gain "full control" of the city by Wednesday.

However he urged the 450 Belgian UN peacekeepers to stay and said the RPF remained committed to an August peace plan and wanted to implement it after "restoring order" to Kigali.

The interim government, which fled the city and set up headquarters in the town of Gitarama, 50 kilometers (30 miles) southwest of here Tuesday, meanwhile offered a ceasefire to the RPF on Wednesday, to take effect from 12 noon (1000 GMT).

Speaking on national radio, the government said the army was gaining control of the situation.

UN officials were continuing shuttle diplomacy between the government and rebel forces in an attempt to forge a ceasefire.

Informed sources believed the rebels would reject the routed government's ceasefire offer, particularly as the rebels appeared extremely confident of their ability to seize the capital.

The RPF, made up of minority Tutsis, has refused to recognize the government formed a week ago after the Hutu president, Juvenal Habyarimana, was killed in a plane crash along with the Burundian president last Wednesday at Kigali airport.

The International Committee of the Red Cross began to distribute food at sites in Kigali where local authorities reported "concentrations of people in need."

A convoy from the Red Cross and the French branch of Doctors Without Borders was expected in Kigali from Bujumbura later Wednesday. Two surgical teams were aboard the convoy with 25 tonnes of medical aid.

The rebels' arrival in Kigali triggered a mass exodus of Hutus who fear the Tutsis will retaliate for an orgy of massacres of Tutsis by Hutus in the past few days.

In Geneva, UN refugee officials prepared to send emergency food aid for some 10,000 people they said had been displaced.

Emergency food supplies for Rwanda have been set up in northern Burundi, western Tanzania and eastern Zaire, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spokesmen said.

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