Kigali airport shelled as peace talks to open

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KIGALI, April 14 (AFP) - Kigali airport was shelled Thursday and Belgium decided to withdraw its peacekeepers as Rwanda's rebels and military were to open talks on restoring order after a week of ethnic slaughter and chaos.

Two salvoes of mortar shells were fired at the airport as Belgian and French paratroopers prepared to leave, but there were no casualties or damage, a Belgian Defence Ministry spokesman said in Brussels.

Guerrillas of the Front, dominated by the minority Tutsi tribe, meanwhile continued battling government troops, mostly from the majority Hutu group, for control of the blood-steeped capital Kigali.

It was unclear who was responsible for the shelling of the airport, but the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) on Tuesday gave foreign forces 24 hours to leave the airport or face attacks.

"This is a serious incident which endangers the evacuation of foreigners," the Belgian spokesman said.

The rebels and government forces accused each other of attacking the airport.

A senior government officer told AFP the RPF had set up mortars on a hill overlooking the airport, where he said the government had troops stationed.

He also said his troops were currently battling rebels for control of a fuel depot about three kilometers (two miles) from the city centre. "The depot is strategic, we must maintain control of it or we'll be strangled," he said.

Rebel commanders were to meet government military officers to discuss ways of ending the bloodletting that has claimed 20,000 lives since the deaths of Rwanda's and neighbouring Burundi's presidents last week.

The senior army officer said the talks, to be held under UN-control, would go ahead despite renewed fighting between the two sides, but the meeting had not begun as of 2:00 p.m.

(1200 GMT)

French and Belgian troops were rushed to Kigali to evacuate foreigners stranded in the central Africal nation riven by a centuries'-old tribal feud.

But Belgium, seen by the army as favouring the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), has now decided to withdraw its 400 peacekeepers serving with the 2,500-strong UN force.

"Their peacekeeping mission no longer makes sense," Belgian Foreign Minister Willy Claes said in Brussels.

Ten Belgian soldiers guarding Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyamana were killed as members of the presidential guard abducted and assassinated her last Thursday.

Forty French troops still in Kigali were to leave "soon," a spokesman said. The rebels have long accused France of supporting the government.

The rolling green hills on the outskirts of Kigali echoed with artillery and small arms fire Thursday.

But there was no sign of a breakthrough by the rebels, who have announced that they will soon win control of the body-strewn capital, and military sources said government forces were trying to retake a rebel-held area.

Meanwhile the rebels reinforced their positions in Kigali and remained in control of an eastern area which they have held for the past six days.

The rebels failed to capture a gendarmerie base in northern Kigali on Wednesday, sources said here.

Wednesday's announcement by the UN Security Council that the rebels and government forces were to open talks was hailed as "the first glimmer of hope" by government radio on Thursday.

The Front had earlier refused to negotiate with the government and had rejected its truce offers.

Rebel radio said Thursday that the talks would not be about a ceasefire but about uniting against the "clique of killers" which it blamed for the bloodshed.

The two sides were to meet at the UN headquarters here at the Amahoro Hotel in eastern Kigali.

UN chief in Rwanda, General Romeo Dallaire, said the meeting would be a chance for the warring parties to talk face-to-face, but stressed that it was probably too early to open ceasefire negotiations.

Thousands of refugees have poured across the borders into Burundi, Zaire and Tanzania, sparking a relief crisis as aid agencies struggle to set up camps to fed and care for them.

Rebel radio claimed that the president of Rwanda's provisional government, Theodore Sindikubwabo, was among a group of refugees stranded at the airport in Bujumbura, the capital of neighbouring Burundi.

The slaughter in Rwanda was

triggered by the deaths of Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundi's President Cyprien Ntaryamira when their plane crashed last Wednesday. The Rwandan armed forces said the plane had been hit by a rocket.

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