New fighting

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KIGALI, April 14 (AFP) - Rwandan government forces and rebels shelled each other's positions in the capital Kigali on Thursday, as Belgium decided to withdraw its peacekeepers and the airport came under mortar attack.

Commanders of the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front were to meet with government military officers for United Nations-sponsored talks on restoring order after a week of ethnic bloodletting that has claimed 20,000 lives since the presidents of Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi died last week in a plane crash.

But hopes of an end to the slaughter faded when rebel radio said the front had refused to discuss a ceasefire with "the enemies of peace."

The rebels, dominated by the minority Tutsi tribe, said they would only talk to officers who had stood apart from Rwanda's ruling "clique of killers" about forging an alliance to stop members of the majority Hutu group from massacring Tutsi civilians in Kigali.

Merciless machete attacks have left the dirt roads of the capital strewn with bodies.

Two salvoes of mortar shells fell harmlessly at the airport as a last group of 40 French paratroopers were preparing to leave after evacuating foreigners.

The attack delayed their departure, but in Paris French Defence Minister Francois Leotard said they would leave Thursday.

The government troops and the rebels accused each other of shelling the airport, where Belgian paratroopers were also on the point of departure.

But it was unclear who was responsible, though the attack followed the expiry of a 24-hour rebel ultimatum issued Tuesday for foreign forces to quit Rwanda or face attacks.

Meanwhile rebel radio monitored in Nairobi said the president of the provisional government and some of his ministers had fled the country. It

said they were among a group of 200 people who had tried to go to neighboring Burundi but were denied entry.

A few hours before Belgium's King Albert II and Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene attended a memorial service in Brussels for 10 Belgian soldiers killed in Kigali, Foreign Minister Willy Claes said Belgium's 400 troops would leave the 2,500-strong United Nations force in Rwanda.

"Their peacekeeping mission no longer makes sense," Claes said. Belgium's move cast doubt on the future of the UN peacekeeping operation in Rwanda, diplomats and analysts said.

The 10 Belgians were taken to a military camp and executed last week because they had tried to protect Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyamana, assassinated by the presidential guard which accused her of supporting the rebels.

The government forces accuse Belgium and the UN forces of backing the rebels, or at least sympathising with them.

The rebels, however, claim that French forces have helped the government during the three-year civil war that was rekindled by the deaths of the two presidents in the plane crash last week. Government forces said the aircraft was shot down.

Heavy weapons fire erupted in Kigali on Thursday afternoon as the front's mainly Tutsi guerrillas continued battling the mostly Hutu government troops for control of the capital.

A senior government officer said a battle was raging for control of a crucial fuel depot. "We must maintain control of it or we'll be strangled," he said.

Uncertainty continued Thursday as UN officials shuttled between the military and their rebel foes in an effort to bring the two sides together, a senior government officer said.

But the meeting had apparently still not begun by late afternoon and the future role of the UN peacekeeping operation, intended to monitor peace accords signed last August, also seemed uncertain.

The UN's failure to end factional fighting in Somalia has dampened enthusiasm for military interventions in Africa, while the fact that foreign peacekeepers are not perceived as neutral in Rwanda would make it hard to impose a ceasefire, analysts said.

UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said in a letter to the Security Council that the Belgian pullout would make it difficult for the UN to accomplish its mission in Rwanda.

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