Truce talks failing to take place

Annie Thomas

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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 UN-sponsored ceasefire talks failed to get off the ground.

Meanwhile Belgium decided to withdraw its peacekeepers and the airport came under mortar attack.

Commanders of the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) had been due to meet with government military officers for 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 the two sides failed to meet, and the commander of the UN mission in the tiny central African country, Canadian General Romeo Dallaire, said the situation was so chaotic it was probably premature to hope for face-to-face talks.

The biggest problem, he said, is the rebels' refusal to recognize the interim government.

Earlier, rebel radio said the guerrilla front had declined 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.

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 paratroop-

ers 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.

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.

Dallaire, the UN commander, said the military situation was fluid, with constant troop movement and pockets of fighting throughout the city and the suburbs.

He also said it was not clear how many rebels were in Kigali, saying it could be anywhere from 1,500 to 3,000. Under a peace agreement signed last year, a 600-strong rebel battalion was stationed in Kigali.

He also distanced himself from statements he made a few days ago that government forces were not putting up much resistance. Dallaire said the rebels had initially gained the upper hand with a quick push into the capital but that now government forces were holding their own.

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