

France leads evacuation operation in Rwanda

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PARIS, April 9 (Reuter) - France spearheaded an international effort to rescue foreigners from war-torn Rwanda on Saturday, flying in hundreds of soldiers to the capital Kigali where ethnic fighting flared anew.

A contingent of 280 French paratroopers aboard five Transall C-160 transport planes landed at dawn in the capital, securing control of the airport with Rwandan armed forces, the armed forces chief of staff, Admiral Jacques Lanxade, said.

Another 120 men were expected to be flown in later in the day from positions in Central African Republic capital Bangui, he told a news conference.

The evacuation operation, codenamed "Amaryllis", was hampered by fighting between Rwandan forces and rebels, and between ethnic factions, Lanxade said.

"The fighting is making it very difficult to circulate in the city," he said. "In addition, the city is experiencing troubles stemming from fighting between different factions."

In Shanghai, Foreign Minister Alain Juppe, accompanying Prime Minister Edouard Balladur on an official visit to China, said the situation in Rwanda was "serious".

Witnesses in Kigali said three convoys of foreigners left the capital by road and headed towards the relative calm of Rwanda's central African neighbour, Burundi.

They said French forces did not control the airport, as previously believed, and the situation in Kigali was chaotic and dangerous. "An air evacuation is out of the question," one Western diplomat said.

Philippe Gaillard, head of the International Red Cross in Rwanda, said the number of victims who died in fighting in Kigali in the past days probably ran into thousands.

The violence erupted after Rwanda's President Juvenal Habyarimana and President Cyprien Ntaryamira of neighbouring Burundi were killed on Wednesday when a rocket destroyed their plane as they were landing in Kigali from a meeting in Tanzania.

Lanxade said a French priest was killed in northern Rwanda on Wednesday and two French government workers were believed to have been killed in Kigali. A third worker was missing.

Fighting resumed in Kigali on Saturday after a brief lull following a ceasefire agreement.

Alain Bourin, leader of the French expatriate community in Kigali, said fighting was less intense on Saturday than over the previous two days but foreigners were barricaded in their homes.

"There is much less shooting but it (ceasefire) is far from being respected," he told France-Info radio. "We still hear mortar fire and automatic weapons in the streets."

French government workers whose presence was not vital would be taken out but there was no general evacuation order for the entire 600-odd French community in Rwanda, Lanxade said.

A Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said French nationals who wanted to leave Rwanda would be given the chance to do so.

"If the situation remains as bad as it is, the decision to repatriate everyone will be taken," Bourin said. "If the situation improves, I think we'll not be repatriated."

Bourin said French nationals had been told to prepare one suitcase per couple weighing no more than 30 kg (66 lbs).

Medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) said it planned to send two planes carrying 33 tonnes of medical aid and two teams of doctors to Kigali to care for dozens of people in urgent need of surgery.

The French troops and planes came from the Central African Republic capital Bangui, where Paris normally has 1,300 soldiers, five Jaguar fighter-bombers and three Transall C-160 transport planes.

Its Bangui forces were reinforced by troops and materiel sent from elsewhere in Africa, where France has a total of 8,600 soldiers.

France, which for several years had about 300 soldiers in Rwanda, withdrew its remaining contingent last December. They were replaced by United Nations troops. France still has a small number of military technical advisers in Rwanda and Burundi.

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