

France hopes to complete Rwanda evacuation soon

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PARIS, April 11 (Reuter) - French soldiers will airlift the last French residents out of war-torn Rwanda on Monday and will leave as soon as other Europeans have been successfully evacuated, a cabinet minister said.

Cooperation Minister Michel Roussin said all but 70 members of the 600-strong French community in the central African country had been taken to safety by Sunday night, most of them in French military planes.

The remaining 70 were being protected by French troops in Kigali, the capital, and would be airlifted out in the morning.

Western nations rushed to get their nationals out of Rwanda after an orgy of tribal violence, unleashed by the killing of Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana last week, killed many thousands of people.

A first group of 43 French citizens evacuated from Kigali arrived at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris late on Sunday.

Wrapped in green airline blankets, some said they remained holed up at home in terror through the fighting until French soldiers arrived and took them to Kigali airport.

Others said the Westerners' neighbourhoods were spared and they did not witness any violence. They kept in touch through a radio network set up by the French embassy after earlier tribal clashes in the city four years ago.

Some Rwandan personalities took refuge at the French embassy and Roussin told France-3 television they would be protected.

Among those flown out were 88 orphaned children, some of whom are in the process of being adopted by families in France.

"Some of them have seen war two or three times. They have seen many dead," a priest accompanying them told French radio.

Alain Piron, head of Kigali's French school where French residents gathered, said the evacuation took place in good conditions and was suspended at nightfall.

He said only embassy staff would remain behind, but he expected the many of the French nationals would return. "I think this won't take long," he said.

About 500 French paratroops were involved in the evacuation, codenamed "Amaryllis". Belgian paratroops also arrived in Kigali to help to rescue their 1,500 fellow countrymen, the largest Western group in Rwanda.

France maintained about 300 soldiers in Rwanda for several years until they were replaced by U.N. troops last December.

Roussin has said France does not want to intervene in the fighting, largely along tribal lines, between government troops and rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).

He offered France's assistance to help to restore peace. "If men of goodwill manage to sign a ceasefire and the peace process can resume, France and the international community will be at both sides' disposal to help," he said.

Habyarimana and President Cyprien Ntaryamira of neighbouring Burundi were killed last Wednesday when a rocket hit their plane as they were returning from regional peace talks in Tanzania.

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