

France may fly westerners to safety from Rwanda

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PARIS, April 10 (Reuter) - France said it hoped to rescue all its remaining nationals from war-ravaged Rwanda on Sunday and then would probably begin flying other endangered westerners to safety.

"We think that our 600 countrymen can be totally evacuated during the day," Cooperation Minister Michel Roussin told French radio.

As of 1400 GMT on Sunday, 246 of the 600-strong French community in strife-torn Rwanda had been evacuated, most in airlifts from the capital Kigali, the Foreign Ministry said.

A first batch of French citizens was expected to arrive in Paris late on Sunday on a commercial flight after stopping over in either the Central African Republic capital of Bangui or the Burundi capital of Bujumbura, it said.

Roussin said the French evacuation mission "Amaryllis", involving nearly 500 paratroopers and five military transport planes, was operating smoothly and enabling a quick exodus.

By Sunday afternoon, 174 French nationals had escaped in three military airlifts, while 62 fled by road and 10 took a United Nations flight to Burundi, the Foreign Ministry said.

France was spearheading the drive to evacuate westerners.

A first group of Belgian paratroops sent to evacuate Westerners were flown to the airport at Kigali on Sunday, Belgian BRTN radio said.

The French forces will "probably have a role to play" in evacuating the 1,500 Belgians, 300 Americans and more than 200 other Europeans from the central African country, Roussin said.

"Our operation is working, our capacity enables us to evacuate very quickly," Roussin said. "The Belgians are in reserve, the Americans are in Bujumbura and a plane is arriving from Italy."

Roussin, in charge of French policy in Africa, reiterated that French troops would not intervene in fighting, largely along tribal lines, between government and rebel troops.

The rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) was quoted as saying it was prepared to attack French paratroopers if they intervened in the ethnic conflict.

The rebels suspect France, which until recently had several hundred soldiers in Rwanda, of siding with the Hutu majority. The RPF, with a force of about 10,000 guerrillas, is predominantly of the minority but formerly ruling Tutsi tribe.

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.

“France has always been neutral in this matter between the Hutus and Tutsis,” Roussin said. “This is a problem the Rwandans must settle together.”

However, Roussin acknowledged some Rwandans had escaped with French nationals. “There are very strong ties between some French and Rwandan families,” he said.

About 10 members of the family of late Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana, killed when a rocket hit his plane as it landed in Kigali last Wednesday, were reported to be on the first French plane to leave the Rwandan capital on Saturday.

Roussin also said some Rwandan authorities, fearing slaughter, were holed up in the French embassy in Kigali. “We will continue to protect them,” he said.

France, anxious to avoid jeopardising its perilous evacuation mission, has repeatedly emphasised it is neutral.

Paris sent several hundred troops to Rwanda after RPF rebels invaded from Uganda in October 1990. The last French troops were pulled out last December and replaced by U.N. peacekeepers.

But France kept a small number of military advisers in the country, and since Saturday French troops have been allied with government forces in holding Kigali airport.

Philippe Gaillard, head of the International Red Cross in Rwanda, told French radio he expected all volunteer aid groups to leave Rwanda by Monday.

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