

France promises to keep out of Rwandan conflict

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PARIS, April 10 (Reuter) - France, anxious to avoid jeopardising a perilous mission to airlift nationals from war-ravaged Rwanda, vowed on Sunday that its troops would stay out of fighting between government and rebel forces.

The rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) was quoted as saying it was prepared to attack a contingent of 460 French paratroopers sent to the central African nation on an evacuation mission if they intervened in the ethnic conflict.

The French operation, code-named "Amaryllis", resumed on Sunday as a military transport plane flew 64 nationals out of Rwanda to safety, bringing to more than 150 the number of French citizens rescued since the mission began on Saturday.

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.

"Our mission is a strictly humanitarian mission permitting French nationals to leave Rwanda," said a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, underscoring France's avowed neutrality.

The RPF said a 4,000-strong force of rebels was advancing towards the central African state's capital, Kigali, on Sunday.

"French troops will not intervene," French Cooperation Minister Michel Roussin was quoted by French radio as saying.

The French troops are holding Kigali airport with government forces, who had blocked the arrival of paratroopers from Belgium, the country's former colonial ruler. The government finally cleared the Belgian troops' arrival on Sunday.

The Belgians are unpopular among the Hutu tribe, which believes they support the rebels.

While France withdrew 300 soldiers from Rwanda last December, it has kept a small number of military advisers.

French citizens in Kigali said they feared fighting between the government and rebels would intensify, adding to bloodshed that has covered the small country since its Hutu president, Juvenal Habyarimana, was assassinated last Wednesday.

"The main battle may not have been fought yet," International Red Cross coordinator Philippe Gaillard told France-Info radio from Kigali.

The Defence Ministry said 100 fresh French troops were sent to Kigali from the Central African Republic capital Bangui on Sunday, guaranteeing the security of the estimated 450 nationals remaining in the country, most of them in the capital.

But the exodus of French citizens, which officials in Paris said was proceeding without a hitch, would be jeopardised if its troops were drawn into the tribal bloodletting.

By Sunday morning French troops had flown 107 nationals out of Rwanda in two flights, one toward Bangui and a second to the Burundi capital Bujumbura. Most of those were expected to fly to Paris on Sunday evening.

An undisclosed number of the 600-odd nationals safely fled from rural villages to neighbouring Zaire and Burundi.

A company of soldiers was to leave the southwestern French city of Toulouse on Sunday for Bangui to reinforce France's military presence in Africa. Before the evacuation operation began France had about 8,600 soldiers on the continent.

French residents in Kigali said they were gathering at the French school or being sought by soldiers at their homes, where they were barricaded behind mattresses. "It's very, very anguishing," Nicole Obels told French radio by telephone.

"Kigali's inhabitants are committing suicide," Gaillard said.

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