

France flies most nationals out of Rwanda

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PARIS, April 10 (Reuter) - France evacuated most of its nationals from war-ravaged Rwanda on Sunday and said it would help flying other endangered westerners to safety.

A Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said 525 of some 600 French residents in the central African country had left, most of them from Kigali aboard French military planes.

Spokeswoman Catherine Colonna said the airlift was halted as night fell and would resume on Monday morning. France-2 television reporter Philippe Boisserie, reporting from the airport, said later the airlift was continuing.

The evacuation started at the weekend after tens of thousands of people died in fighting and ethnic violence unleashed by the assassination of Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana last week.

Cooperation Minister Michel Roussin said the evacuation mission codenamed "Amaryllis", involving nearly 500 paratroopers and five military transport planes, was operating smoothly.

Colonna said French planes flew out 400 French nationals and some foreigners. Another 10 French people left on a United Nations plane and 115 left by road for Burundi and Zaire.

She said French soldiers rescued 88 children from an orphanage near Kigali after the orphanage's nuns called for help. Some of the children had been in the process of being adopted by French families.

Boisserie said grenade and rocket fire prevented a convoy of French soldiers from reaching the French embassy in Kigali. But he did not think the fire was aimed at French troops.

A first batch of French citizens was due 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.

Roussin said the French forces will "probably have a role to play" in evacuating other westerners. Belgian officials said eight planes carrying Belgian paratroopers landed at Kigali to help rescue 1,500 Belgian residents, the largest Western community in Rwanda.

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 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.

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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