

France completes evacuation from Rwanda

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PARIS, April 11 (Reuter) - France evacuated the last of its nationals wanting to leave war-torn Rwanda on Monday and French soldiers will stay to help other foreigners in the capital Kigali, the foreign ministry said.

Ministry spokesman Richard Duque told reporters that 620 French people had left the central African country, most of them aboard French military planes.

A few French nationals, including a small number of religious workers, had chosen to stay, he said.

"The mission of our military is strictly humanitarian. Their aim is to enable our compatriots to leave. We are also helping foreign nationals who are in difficulty in Kigali," Duque said.

France has said its soldiers would not intervene in the fighting and would leave as soon as all Westerners had been evacuated.

Duque said the French embassy was still operating and that France was ready to contribute if necessary to a dialogue between rival forces.

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 prominent Rwandans took refuge at the French embassy and Cooperation Minister Michel Roussin said 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.

Rwanda's ambassador in Paris appealed for "massive help" for people affected by the fighting, but said that calm was gradually returning to Kigali. "The forces of order are firmly neutralising the last groups of pillagers and other criminals," ambassador Jean-Marie Vianney Ndagijimana said in a statement.

Nathalie Feuillet, a doctor in Kigali with the French medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres, said it was impossible to operate on those who had been seriously injured in the fighting.

“It’s absolutely impossible to work. It’s extremely dangerous. For MSF the decision has been taken. We are evacuating everybody (who is seriously injured),” she told France-Info radio.

She said the main hospital was “a big charnel-house with many, many dead and a few patients, some 50 or so. Most of them are very seriously injured and cannot wait for surgery.”

About 500 French paratroops were involved in the evacuation of French nationals, 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.

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