

Shelling delays pullout of last French troops

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PARIS, April 14 (Reuter) - Mortar fire on Kigali airport delayed the pullout of the last French troops from Rwanda on Thursday, Defence Minister Francois Leotard said.

His ministry said 40 of the 500 French soldiers sent to Rwanda to help evacuate foreigners were still in Kigali.

Leotard told reporters that France was determined to pull out all its soldiers as soon as possible.

Witnesses said six mortar bombs hit the airport as the last Belgian forces prepared to leave before the expiry of a rebel ultimatum to all foreign forces to leave by midnight (2200 GMT).

Leotard said the situation in Kigali was confused and he could not rule out that the airport may have been shelled in order to "delay the departure of the French troops..."

France has stressed its troops went to Rwanda to help in the evacuation and would not intervene in fighting between government and rebel forces.

The Defence Ministry said French military planes had evacuated 454 French nationals and 784 others to safety from Rwanda.

Leotard denied that France, by pulling out, was abandoning Rwandans to their fate. He said Paris was open to taking part in a peacekeeping operation.

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