

French Accused of Protecting Killers

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UN colonel says troops sowed fear among Rwandans

THE head of Ethiopia's United Nations peacekeeping force in south-west Rwanda has accused the French of helping Hutus guilty of the mass murder of Tutsis to escape justice.

Colonel Tadele Slassie claims that French troops collaborated with and protected known murderers, and released prisoners suspected of crimes against humanity before France withdrew last weekend from the « safe zone » it set up in south-west Rwanda.

« I don't think the French troops were bothered about the murderers. They let them escape, » Col Slassie said.

The colonel, former chief of intelligence for Ethiopia's victorious rebel army, said he saw French soldiers transporting Rwandan troops loyal to the defunct government into Zaire. And he accused the French of sowing fear among the civilian population.

Col Slassie is concerned about nine missing prisoners the commander of the French forces in Cyangugu, Colonel Hogard, had said would be handed over to the Ethiopians.

« When we came here, the French colonel told us he had prisoners and that he was ready to give them to us until the new government accepted responsibility, » Col Slassie said. « At the

last moment, we didn't receive any prisoners. We don't know what happened. Did they escape with the French? »

It is believed that one of the missing prisoners was arrested by a Rwandan gendarme, Simbashiramakenga Theophile, who was hired by the French to help maintain order in the « safe zone ».

Mr Simbashiramakenga said he arrested a Rwandan commander wanted by authorities for his alleged involvement in the massacre of more than 3,000 people in Cyangugu. He said he handed the man, Commander Prima, to French troops only to find he had disappeared before the French pull-out.

Col Slassie claims the French hired other Rwandans suspected of involvement in the slaughter, and provided food and shelter. He said : «There was a teacher called Sebastial. A Tutsi told us the teacher had killed seven of his family and that the teacher was working and living with the French.

«We went to the teacher's house and we found an AK-47 that had been registered by the French. They even let him keep his gun.

«I knew the teacher was being protected by the French when I met him when I came on an advance reconnaissance.»

On another reconnaissance mission before the Ethiopian deployment, Col

Slassie visited Bugarama, where he says he asked to look around a cement factory. The French refused his request.

Col Slassie later discovered the French had housed 75 soldiers loyal to the government there.

He says he also saw French troops escort Rwandan forces to Zaire, and watched French troops take three busloads of armed soldiers to the border. He says he believes it was part of a strategy to encourage Hutus to leave the former French zone to undermine the Rwanda Patriotic Front government in Kigali, which is viewed with hostility by Paris. « The colonel told me clearly : 'I have told them to go to Zaire and they have gone', » he said.

He claims the French were also encouraging Rwanda's civilian population to retreat.

« The French were saying that when they left this area, the Tutsis will kill them. I spoke to workers at the cement factory who said that for two days the French told them they would be killed, » he said. Col Slassie does not

conceal his loathing for the Hutus responsible for the mass murder of Tutsis. That some Hutus are hostile to Ethiopians because they believe they are of the same ethnic origin as Tutsis does not make him more sympathetic.

« I was fighting for 17 years for human rights in Ethiopia but in those years we did not see such casualties as we see in Rwanda, » he said. « We have seen half a million people killed in two months. And they are ready to do the same thing again. »

He is angered by France's apparent willingness to permit the guilty to go unpunished and by the failure of the international community to act to prevent a recurrence of the slaughter.

« We don't have to accept governments that kill people in our midst. The Zairean government is protecting these killers and they are organising them to do the same thing again, » he said.

« I haven't heard the world, or the UN, or even Amnesty International publicly condemning Zaire. »