

French troops not to become "buffer force" in Rwanda: Leotard
(UPDATES with Leotard inside Rwanda, ADDS quotes)
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NYARUSHISHI, Rwanda, June 29 (AFP) - French troops in Rwanda will not become a "buffer force" between the warring Rwandan government and rebel forces, French Defence Minister Francois Leotard said here Wednesday.

Leotard, who spoke as he visited a refugee camp 15 kilometres (10 miles) inside western Rwanda, said: "Our aim is to hand over to the humanitarian organisations, particularly to the Africans."

He had earlier made a tour of inspection of French bases at Goma and Bukavu in Zaire.

"France must not substitute itself for the Rwandans," Leotard said.

The answer to Rwanda's problems "cannot only be French. The real answer is the United Nations' mission," he said, adding that Rwanda must remain "a multi-ethnic country ... and the only solution is political ... despite the genocide."

Leotard was shown round the camp at Nyarushishi by Colonel Didier Thibaut and accompanied by the bishop of the nearby diocese of Cyangugu, Tahdee Ntihiyurwa.

France is going to send food and sanitary equipment to the camp very shortly, Leotard said.

The French minister asked children in the camp if the French troops and government army soldiers who were running the camp were behaving well. "Oui," one said.

The operation has to cover 7,000 kilometres (4,500 miles) on the ground, Leotard said. Out of the 2,500 men involved in the intervention, 1,000 will deploy in Rwanda and 1,500 will be in support, he added.

Leotard then went on to visit French troops at Gishyta on the edge of Lake Kivu four kilometres (2.5 miles) from the forward position of the mainly-Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) troops.

The RPF has previously said it will regard French troops as an enemy force and threatened to fire on them.

Earlier Wednesday, Leotard arrived in Goma, eastern Zaire, where France has set up headquarters for its Rwanda operation.

Leotard was accompanied by the junior minister for humanitarian action, Lucette Michaux-Chevry.

Michaux-Chevry was to meet with the civilian team in charge of the humanitarian operation.

The two ministers would fly out of Goma late Wednesday and return to France early Thursday, officials said in Paris.

About 1,400 French crack troops and 300 vehicles were deployed on the Zairean-Rwandan border early Monday, slightly more than half of the troops that are to take part in the UN-mandated mission.

Up to 500,000 Rwandans, mostly minority Tutsis, have been killed since April 6, when president Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, died after his plane was downed in

Kigali.

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