

French Force in Skirmish in Rwanda

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French troops engaged in a brief firefight with Rwandan rebels today during a rescue of some 600 orphans and 100 religious workers from this southern Rwandan city. It was the first combat for the French force, which arrived 10 days ago with the stated mission of protecting civilians in the brutal civil war.

Tensions are rising between the rebels and the French, who have proposed that the United Nations authorize the creation of a safe haven in southwestern Rwanda from which all military forces would be excluded. The rebels, who control the eastern two-thirds of the country, oppose the plan. They say that it would protect those responsible for the killing of thousands of members of the Tutsi minority and that it would almost certainly lead to clashes between rebel and French forces.

The predominantly Tutsi rebel group, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, has been fighting the Hutu-led forces of the Rwandan Government. France supported the Rwandan Government before the latest round of the four-year-old civil war erupted in April.

As the French were leaving Butare today at midday, rebel forces were within 500 yards of the city.

City's Fall Imminent

"It is a question of hours" before the city falls, said Col. Didier Thibaut, commander of the French operation. Rwandan Government soldiers were fleeing on foot and in cars from the city, the second largest in the country after the capital, Kigali.

Butare's population of about 30,000 has been swollen to several times that number by thousands of refugees from other parts of the country. Amid the sound of automatic-rifle fire and the thud of mortars, people poured out of Butare by every means possible today, including a yellow Caterpillar bulldozer. The rich stuffed their cars with children, televisions and kitchenware, and headed west along a twisting road through the dense Nyungwe Forest. Small pickup trucks sagged under the weight of household goods and people perched on top.

Thousands of barefoot peasants walked, suitcases and rolled mattresses balanced on their heads, holding their children by the hand.

Arrival of Rescue Mission

Fleeing residents said that rebel forces began advancing on Butare a week ago and launched a major attack on Friday evening. Today, the French rescue mission, which included paratroopers and navy commandos, arrived in the city from the west almost precisely at noon. A convoy of jeeps with mounted machine guns escorted six buses.

Five of the buses went to an orphanage where the children were quickly hustled on board and the buses, with military escort, headed south to Burundi, Rwanda's southern neighbor, along a dirt road where at least 100,000 refugees were already camped, most without shelter. The other bus picked up the religious workers, including many nuns, and headed west.

By 1:30, Colonel Thibaut and his unit were headed out of Butare to the west, in a convoy joined by several passenger cars eager for French protection. It was then that the convoy was fired on, and the French soldiers returned the fire.

Some of the rebel fire struck the French jeeps, but no one was wounded,

Colonel Thibaut said. He said he did not know if his troops had killed or wounded any of the rebels.

"I received orders to get out of Butare quickly because we were under fire from the R.P.F.," Colonel Thibaut said, using the initials of the Rwandan Patriotic Front. "My mission is not to fight the R.P.F."

Since arriving on June 23, the French have said emphatically that their mission is only to protect civilians and that they will not take sides in the civil war. At the same time, French officials have said that the rebels cannot be allowed to achieve a military victory.

On Saturday, the French asked the United Nations Security Council to authorize the creation of a safe haven in southwestern Rwanda. France said it would be forced to withdraw its troops if it did not get international support for such an area.

The rebels, who have been suspicious of French intentions from the beginning, denounced the proposal.

"It is a confirmation that the French mission is not for humanitarian purposes," said Theogene Rudasingwa, Secretary General of the Rwanda Patriotic Front.