

French military role in Rwanda under question

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KIGALI, March 7 (AFP) - Doubts are increasing among Western expatriates about the role of French troops in Rwanda, where rebels are battling government forces in the hills only 30 kilometres (18 miles) from the capital Kigali.

Paris has denied accusations by the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) that its nearly 700 troops, officially here to protect more than 400 French residents and other expatriates, have supervised government troops during fighting.

But the rebels have demanded assurances that the French soldiers will leave before they agree to resume stalled peace talks with the government.

"Whatever the intentions of the French, if they weren't here, the rebels would be in Kigali now," said a Western diplomat. "The Rwandan army is a shambles."

Rwandan soldiers near the front and at roadblocks around the capital are regularly seen swilling beer.

The army faces tough RPF guerrillas, relatively disciplined and battle-hardened from years in exile when many served in the army of neighbouring Uganda.

Both sides have been accused of massacring civilians in a wave of tribal bloodletting that has killed hundreds this year.

At key roadblocks in Kigali, French soldiers ask Rwandans for their identification papers and search cars for weapons. Many of the 4,000 expatriates here, including 1,500 Belgians, say they would leave if the French troops pulled out.

French military officials maintain that the French troops are deployed only in Kigali, though an AFP reporter saw French soldiers in jeeps only 1.5 kilometres (a mile) from fighting some 30 kilometres northwest of Kigali.

"They're our early-warning alarms," said a French military official. "They're there to warn us if there's a threat to the capital and

we need to evacuate foreigners in a hurry.”

A group of foreign aid workers claimed that French soldiers were virtually commanding Rwandan soldiers two days after the rebels launched

a major offensive early last month. France quadrupled the number of its soldiers in Rwanda after the rebels attacked, violating a seven-month ceasefire.

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