

Dawn Raid by French Rescues Nuns and Orphans.

Sam Kiley

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By Sam Kiley in Goma.

French special forces yesterday rescued 35 nuns, including a Briton and two Americans, in a dawn raid on a Rwandan government bastion. More than 100 commandos flew into Kibuye, on the shore of Lake Kivu, to rescue the nuns from their convent where they had been held for more than two months while 10,000 Tutsi and opposition supporters were slaughtered.

French reconnaissance troops decided that it would be impossible to guarantee their safety as the slaughter in the surrounding area grew. The nuns said they had been threatened with murder by government militia every day and had heard from inside their building the screams of people being killed. At least 3,000 people were killed in the church at Kibuye, where last weekend women from the Hutu tribe were frantically cleaning the floor to hide evidence of the murders before the French arrived.

The British nun, Sister Susan McLean, 42, who has been working in Rwanda for 13 years, said with cool understatement that the situation had been "dicey" as the organised slaughter of thousands in the lakeside resort began. "We didn't really go out at all in the two months and a half," she said.

The 35 nuns and novices, including Belgians and Rwandans from both the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority, and eight orphans in their care were flown by helicopter to a French base at Goma, eastern Zaire.

Yesterday the nuns looked sad and drawn as they spoke briefly about their ordeal. They said that often they had been taken outside their convent during the night by militiamen and threatened with murder. They were divided into their nationalities and ethnic groups during the sessions and the Tutsi sisters were abused physically and psychologically.

Sister Susan's mother, Marie McLean, 66, of Billingham, Cleveland, said yesterday her daughter had told her that "the soldiers would come and try to find out if they were hiding anyone. If they were, their lives would be forfeit. They would drag the nuns from their beds every night and put them against a wall and threaten to kill them."

The nun's father, Peter, 76, a retired joiner, said: "We've been saying our prayers, and now we're on cloud nine."

Sister Susan refused yesterday to identify which people had been behind the threats and killings. "I don't know

the difference between the Hutu and the Tutsi," she said.

Sister Marie Julian, from Buffalo, New York, said that, although they had been protected by local gendarmes, the Tutsi sisters were most at risk from the militias. "There were visits in the night, the calling of threats, that sort of thing," she said.

The rescue of the nuns is the first time French troops have flown people out of Rwanda since the start of Operation Turquoise last week. They have provided security for 8,000 Tutsi and intellectuals in a camp near the southern city of Cyangugu, but elsewhere they have found it hard to find people to save.

Six Jeeps filled with marines went in search yesterday of 10,000 refugees reported to be living about 25 miles north of Gisenye, on the border with Zaire, but without success.

The operation yesterday received its first medical and food aid for refugees when a chartered plane flew in 40 tonnes from France to Goma. Gerard Larome, director of an emergency team at the French Foreign Ministry, told reporters it was the first of ten or 12 airlifts in the next week of French medicine and food.

He said the first objective of the operation was to provide aid in a secure way to the needy because of the troops'

presence. Officials said that Francois Leotard, the French Defence Minister, would travel to Zaire and Rwanda today to meet the troops and visit several refugee camps.

In the meantime, the United Nations tried yesterday to get food to 8,000 trapped and terrified civilians sheltering in a church complex in the battered government-held sector of Kigali, the Rwandan capital. The civilians, hungry and in fear of their lives, have been caught on the wrong side of the battle lines as the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front tries to pound government loyalists into submission. "We are trying to get food to the Holy Family (church complex), and there is a very remote chance we will evacuate people from there as well," said Major Jean-Guy Plante, the spokesman for the UN Assistance Mission.

Many of the people at the Holy Family complex are Tutsi and in danger of being pulled out and butchered by pro-government Hutu militias who mill around at the entrances to the buildings.

The church, close to the front line where rebels are pressing a fierce assault with daily mortar bombardments of government areas, also shelters many majority Hutu fleeing the predominantly Tutsi rebels.