

(ADDS minister confirms report, French military unable confirm)

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GOMA, Zaire, July 14 (AFP) - With rebels advancing, Rwanda's interim government fled Thursday from Gisenyi in the northwest to Cyangugu, the town where the French intervention force is based, a government minister said.

Jean Kabamda, primer minister of Rwanda's embattled interim government, traveled to Cyangugu, in the southwest on the border with Zaire, aboard a Rwandan army helicopter, said Alphonse Nombel, a journalist with the Burundi Times newspaper.

His report was confirmed by the labour minister of Rwanda's interim government, Jean de Dieu Habineza.

Nombel said he met Kabamda at a Gisenyi hotel where the government held an emergency meeting and decided to flee, and that he watched the premier leave.

A French military spokesman, Colonel Jean Claude Perruchot, said in Goma that he could not confirm the report.

In Paris, the French foreign ministry indicated it was opposed to the government resettling in Cyangugu -- inside a safety zone that French intervention forces have set up to protect civilians -- because it would violate France's neutral stance in the war.

"It is not desirable that Rwandan political leaders enter this zone," a ministry spokesman said.

France has said that it would keep out members of either party to the war, by force if necessary, if it felt their presence would threaten civilians.

The spokesman said the French military mission was mandated by the United Nations to protect civilians and that having the government settle there "could change the nature of the zone, where we stress our action is strictly humanitarian."

Other ministers headed overland for the town of Kibuye, where French troops are also based, on their way to join the premier in Cyangugu, and still others are fleeing across the border to Goma in Zaire, the journalist said.

"The government wants to empty (Gisenyi) to prepare a counterattack against the rebels," Nombel said, adding that elite army units had taken up positions outside the town.

Units of the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front had advanced to within 25 kilometers (15 miles) of Gisenyi Thursday after seizing the garrison town of Rugengeri, Rwandan government officials said.

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