

Rwanda Rebels Fire On French Force As Paris Plans Refugee Safety Zone

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From Sam Kiley in Butare and James Bone in New York.

FRENCH forces came under attack from the Rwandan Patriotic Front yesterday during an operation to rescue the front's own Tutsi supporters from heavy frontline fighting.

France sought United Nations backing at the weekend for a plan for French troops to set up a "secure humanitarian zone" to protect hundreds of thousands of people fleeing a rebel advance. The French special forces troops meanwhile came under fire from the rebels as they drove out of Rwanda's second largest city, Butare, with their evacuees. Several rounds slammed into the sides of their vehicles and they returned fire. There were no reports of casualties.

The security zone plan threatened to put the French intervention force in Rwanda in direct confrontation with the front, the predominantly Tutsi rebel movement that has sa-

ved much of the country from massacres carried out by troops and militiamen loyal to the hardline Hutu government. The front last night condemned the French proposal for UN-monitored safe havens for civilians and said that the idea was a cover for military intervention on the side of the government.

UN officials said the front was sending reinforcements from the capital, Kigali, where the remaining government troops are surrounded, and the rebel leader, Major-General Paul Kagame, was said to have taken personal command on the Butare front.

Although France armed and trained the Rwandan army during the RPF's invasion from Uganda in 1990, both Paris and commanders on the ground insist that its new mission to the country is strictly humanitarian. But the front fears that the presence of French forces in Rwanda will slow its advance.

The proposal to set up safe havens had clearly come from France without consultation with senior officers on the ground. Colonel Didier Thibaut, who commanded yesterday's rescue mission, said that he knew nothing of the plan. "My men have orders to return fire if they are attacked, whoever is doing the shooting," he said.

The brief firefight is certain to entrench the anti-French feeling among the front's leaders, although they will have also noted yesterday's rescue mission and the operation in which French troops saved 1,000 Tutsi from certain death in Rwanda's highlands near Kibuye last week. The company of about 100 French paracommandos rescued 600 orphans and about 250 civilians, most of them Tutsi and members of religious orders, who feared leaving Butare in the exodus of

government soldiers.

Butare was empty of civilians and populated only by a few soldiers as the rebels swept in yesterday afternoon. The city, a big prize for the front, was certain to fall into their hands.

The evacuation came as stray machinegun bullets ricocheted up Butare's main street. The rescued civilians slipped out of town as about 2,000 children dressed in khaki rags and carrying rucksacks the same size as themselves, fled.

One small boy walked in a permanent crouch to try to stay clear of the bullets, while his "comrades in arms" were shepherded by armed teenagers. "They are being saved to fight on another front," one government soldier said.