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Rwandan Enemies Struggle to Define French Role

By RAYMOND BONNER,
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NYARUSHISHI, Rwanda, June 26— For the moment, the French paratroops seemed like saviors to the 3,000 Tutsi men, women and children sitting wearily in the tall grass here today.

In their combat fatigues, red berets and sunglasses, and with their assault rifles at the ready, the paratroops alertly scanned the hills for signs of danger as the crowd listened intently to a priest's sermon at Sunday mass.

"Perhaps you think God does not exist because of all the killing," the priest, dressed in white robes, told his listeners, whose clothes were tattered and soiled. "But even in worst times, God has given consolation to those who believe in him. With his love and the courage he gives us, we can survive."

These men, women and children are desperate for solace. Living as refugees under green- and-blue plastic shelters in this camp near the Zairian border, they are survivors of a

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vicious civil war that has pitted the Hutu ethnic majority against the Tutsi minority and left hundreds of thousands dead.

Along the perimeter of the congregation, whose singing was carried by the warm breezy morning air, were the French paratroops, fanned out against an undulating carpet of tea bushes broken by patches of banana plants.

The French are seen as rescuers by the Hutu ethnic majority as well as most of the minority Tutsi here.

But the euphoria generated by the troops' arrival last week on a short-term mission to protect threatened Rwandans may be ephemeral, and even contain the seeds of future difficulties here for France. As the American military discovered last year in Somalia, the French are finding that Rwandans have their own ideas on what the paratroops should do.

The French have said emphatically that their mission is a mercy effort, not a military campaign, and that they will leave by July 31. But that is not what the Tutsi refugees here want.

"We want them to stay for a long time, because if they leave we will be killed," said Francis Sibomana, one of 8,000 Tutsi at the refugee camp here, after the Mass.

Mr. Sibomana has not seen his wife and five children since April 10, when he fled his village during a ferocious attack on Tutsi by a Hutu militia. His eldest son was killed with a spear, he said.

The attack came four days after a plane carrying President Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, mysteriously crashed near the capital. The crash unleashed a wave of anger that quickly led to attacks by Hutu extremists against the Tutsi and against Hutu suspected of moderate political views.

The Hutu in Cyangugu, a commercial and administrative town just northeast of here, have also welcomed the paratroops' presence, part of a French deployment of up to 2,500 troops.

But rather than protect Tutsi refugees, those Hutu assert, the French should be fighting with them against the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front, the rebel group that has seized control of about



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two-thirds of the country. A Welcome for the French

"We are very, very glad that the French are here," said a Hutu man in Cyangugu, which lies at the southern tip of picturesque Lake Kivu. "The R.P.F. wants to kill all of us."

A French tricolor flies from automobile antennas in the town, and "Vive la France!" is written in white chalk on storefronts.

The last time the French sent paratroops to Rwanda, in 1990, it was to prop up a Hutu-dominated Government in the face of attacks by the rebel front. As recently as six months ago, French troops were stationed here in support of the Government.

It is this history that makes many Hutu confident that the French will help them. "We will ask the French soldiers to fight with us against the R.P.F., to push them back into Uganda," said Jean Katanga, a 48-year-old weaver in Cyangugu.

Mr. Katanga expressed a similar sentiment about the Tutsi people as a whole. "They are a minority, and they have to know they are a minority," he said of the Tutsi, who make up approximately 10 percent of the population in this densely populated country of 7 million. 'A Race of Vipers'

Such animosity is reflected in a French-language flyer posted on the faded yellow wall of the immigration post at Cyangugu. "The Tutsi are out to exterminate us," it begins. "We know you are a race of vipers," it said, "drinkers of Bantu blood."

Virtually no Tutsi live in Cyangugu any more, since all have been killed or have fled.

Although the Hutu and Tutsi speak the same language and the same culture, tensions between the groups have persisted since the days of Belgian colonial rule, when the Tutsi were often employed as administrators.

Still, most of Rwanda's Hutu and Tutsi have lived together in relative peace. Many villagers interviewed at the refugee camp after the Mass said they had never known who was a Tutsi and who a Hutu.

But views like those of Mr. Katanga are easily found in Cyangugu, reflecting the effectiveness of the propaganda that leaders of Hutu extremists have used to whip up hatred and insure that the Hutu hang on to political control.

When it was announced that the French were coming, a Hutu radio station, RTL, broadcast that the troops were coming to help the Hutu kill the Tutsi, people at the refugee camp here said.

But the arrival of 50 French paratroops, who are garrisoned on a hilltop overlooking the refugee camp, rapidly dispelled fears. Fear of the Militia

"Before they came we were always afraid. Mr. Sibomana said. "We didn't sleep at night, fearing the militia would come and kill us." At least three times in recent weeks, Hutu militiamen entered the camp and seized men, took them out and killed them nearby, the refugees said.

The refugee camp here was set up here at the end of April, when about 3,300 Tutsi were moved from the sports stadium in Cyangugu. There are now 8,000 Tutsi in the camp, many of them children suffering from severe malnutrition. They are ministered to the International Committee of the Red Cross, the only relief organization that is still working in this dangerous region.

"Now, if any militia tried to enter the refugee camp, we will kill them; it is very clear," said Lieut. Col. Andre Colin, commander of the French paratrooper unit guarding the camp.

His unit, deployed from the French city of Toulouse, patrol the surrounding hills day and night. That is where the dangers have been greatest for the refugees, many of whom who have been killed while returning to their villages to fetch bananas or medicinal herbs. Rwandan Troops Nearby

Many of the refugees in the camp remain fearful because Rwandan Government paramilitary troops are in the vicinity. Twenty yards from the spot where Colonel Colin spoke with reporters, several Rwandan soldiers sat on a bench sharing a beer with two women as they gazed on the refugee shelters.

"We remain very worried about the soldiers; if we complain they can take us away," said one refugee who declined to give his name, lowering his voice as a Rwandan Government soldier wearing a

camouflage uniform and red beret and carrying an automatic rifle walked through the camp. He slowed down as he came to the group.

Later a Rwandan soldier with a grenade hanging from his belt sternly warned the refugees not to talk to journalists.

Asked about the presence of the Rwandan soldiers in the camp, Colonel Colin said, "It is their country." **Despair Is Dispelled**

In late April, the International Committee of the Red Cross had called for an international force to be sent to Rwanda, and they welcome the French presence. Before the troops came, they said, the refugees were despairing.

"They had no will to live," said Ariane Tombet, a Red Cross worker who has been here since April. "When they had diarrhea, we would tell them to drink water, but they said, 'Why bother?' " Today, she said, there is a mood of hope in the camp.

Still, relief officials are cautious, uncertain of where the French intervention might lead. "It remains to be seen if this is the right way," said Nina Winquist, a spokeswoman here for the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Photos: French paratroops have been welcomed as rescuers in Rwanda, where one talked with Hutu in Kayove. (Agence France-Presse) (pg. A1); Watching French soldiers on patrol, a young Rwandan girl stood beside the road yesterday with her father. (Agence France-Presse) (pg. A9) Map of Rwanda highlighting Nyarushishi (pg. A9)

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