

The French Don't Look Neutral in Rwanda

Frank Smyth

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To the Editor

« Rwandan Enemies Struggle to Define French Role » (front page, June 27) states that 1990 was the « last time the French sent paratroopers to Rwanda. » This is incorrect.

In February 1993, after Rwandan Patriotic Front guerrillas, armed largely by English-speaking Uganda, began their largest offensive up to that time, France rushed in at least 680 soldiers, including as many as four companies of paratroopers, to bolster the Government, as was confirmed last summer in Kigali, the Rwandan capital, by Dismas Nsengiyaremye, then Rwanda's Prime Minister, and Jean-Michel Marlaud, the French Ambassador.

Two of these companies were deployed on main roads north of the capital, the remainder in strategic positions around it, including the airport. Some of these troops provided artillery support for Rwandan infantry forces, while French military officers advised Rwandan army commanders in the field.

The French intervention came despite a sustained pattern of human rights abuse by Rwandan Government forces, including the murders of as

many as several thousand Tutsi civilians from 1990 to 1993. Yet, rather than confront these atrocities, France excused them. Ambassador Marlaud said : « There are violations by the Rwandan Army, more because of a lack of control by the Government, rather than the will of the Government. » In contrast, Belgium, Rwanda's former colonial ruler, withdrew its Ambassador, Johan Swinnen, for two weeks in March 1993.

France's initial response to this year's genocide by its Rwandan allies was equally weak. While Belgium, in late April, denied visas to leaders of Rwanda's de facto Government, France formally received Foreign Minister Jerome Bicomumpaka in Paris. This is one reason that Mr. Bicomumpaka now hopes French troops will again ally themselves with the Government against the Rwandan Patriotic Front (news article, June 26), while others have expressed concern that France may end up aiding the murderers more than the victims.

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