

Paris Stands By As Arms Pour Through Eastern Zaire

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By Chris McGreal in Goma

PLANELOADS of French paratroopers descended on eastern Zaire yesterday in preparation for their dispatch to Rwanda for what Paris has portrayed as a humanitarian mission to halt ethnic massacres.

The troops were flown to Goma, a Zairean town on the Rwandan border also used by French arms dealers to break a UN embargo and ship weapons to Rwandan forces weeks after the slaughter of the Tutsi minority by pro-government militias began.

On several occasions last month, chartered cargo planes delivered tons of French and east European-made guns, grenades and ammunition to Goma. The weapons were immediately trucked across the frontier under the protection of the Zairean army.

Some arms will have been used to defend diminishing Rwandan government-held territory from rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front attack. But there is little doubt that because of the relationship between the government army and the militias, the weapons will also have armed the death squads responsible for ethnic massacres.

The French consul in Goma has justified the shipments in conversations with officials of international agencies

as fulfilling private French contracts agreed before the wholesale murder of civilians was sparked by the deaths of the Rwandan president and his Burundian counterpart on April 6. It is unlikely the shipments could have gone ahead without, at the least, the tacit approval of the French authorities which have, until now, been Rwanda's main weapons supplier.

According to witnesses there were at least two flights last month carrying weapons manufactured in France and Bulgaria in addition to unmarked crates. Goma airport was closed to other flights while boxes of weapons were unloaded on to a fleet of lorries. They were escorted to the border and crossed into the Rwandan city of Gisenyi, housing remnants of the Rwandan government.

On other occasions mysterious flights arrived piloted by Nigerians. As recently as 10 days ago the airport was sealed by the Zairean army for the arrival of a plane. The cargo was unloaded at night and shipped into Rwanda. In one case, arms were flown to Goma in a Boeing 707 previously chartered by an international aid agency in the city. The plane still bore the agency's markings.

A Rwandan government minister in

Gisenyi, Casimir Bizimungu, admitted that his forces were continuing to receive weapons supplies in breach of the UN arms embargo but declined to confirm that Goma was an important transshipment point.

“I cannot tell you which way the weapons are coming but Rwanda has been under this military embargo since May when the Security Council passed the resolution. But you know that any time a country is under an embargo it tries its best to get munitions.

You can't let yourself get killed just like that,” he said.

Zaire has assisted with the arms deliveries, which a local official said involved contact with the French authorities, even though officially France is taking a tough stand against President Mobutu Sese Seko's dictatorship.

Zaire is hostile to the Rwandan rebels. Also, President Francois Mitterrand's son reportedly has a close business relationship with Mr Mobutu.