

Guerilla forces continue westward drive and
prepare to form government 'within days'
Rwandan Rebels Condemn Plan For Exclusion
From French 'safe Zone'

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From Sam Kiley in Gikongoro and Charles Bremner in Paris

FRENCH troops continued to fortify their positions and set up joint roadblocks yesterday with militiamen who had been responsible for widespread massacres of Rwanda's Tutsi population less than ten miles from the front line with rebel fighters in Gikongoro.

The rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) said on Monday it would form a government within days and declare a ceasefire but hit out at France for threatening statements over "safe zones" held by French troops. The move follows an announcement from Paris that the French government, with the backing of the United Nations, was to establish a "safe zone" for civilians behind Rwan-

dan government lines. But it will be seen by many as an attempt by the French to protect their long-time friends in the regime, identified as the prime movers behind the killing of hundreds of thousands since April.

Cast on the defensive by its change of tack in Rwanda, France insisted yesterday that the forces of the RPF would not oppose the safe area. As the French army reported that the rebel force of mainly Tutsi tribesmen had halted its advance outside the French lines, Alain Juppé, the Foreign Minister, said the RPF had helped draw up the boundaries of the humanitarian zone proclaimed by France on Monday. "We are not at war, we have no war aims, we are not trying to set ourselves against anybody," he said. But France would shoot back

at any group that attacked the local people, he said. "If troops attack the refugee camps under our protection, then we will defend them."

However, M. Juppé considered the risk to be slight. "I have good reason to believe that the clash which every body is predicting will not take place, simply because we are in contact with the Rwandan Patriotic Front," he said.

On the ground, the triumphant RPF army, which now controls most big cities, vowed to continue its westward drive. French military officials said that they expected the RPF to remain west of the city of Gikongoro, where French commandos dug in on Monday. M Juppe said that the safe area contained some 400,000 refugees.

French officials, including President Mitterrand, who is on a trip to South Africa, were adamant yesterday that the decision to hold about a fifth of Rwanda under French military protection had not changed the nature of Operation Turquoise, which was launched two weeks ago.

"France is not at war," M Mitterrand said. "France is not trying to stop the military advance of one of the sides."

Francois Léotard, the Defence Minister, said that the goal of the French action was "to prevent the murder of civilians ... this has nothing to do with imperialism. I hope that the whole world understands." Edouard

Balladur, the Prime Minister, indicated that he still expected the French forces to withdraw by the end of this month, leaving the military operation to a multinational UN force. M Balladur last week depicted the operation as a reflection of what he called France's "calling as a world power".

Despite the government's calm front, however, there were growing signs of dissent. Several parliamentarians in the government's own Gaullist party questioned the wisdom of interverning in such a solidarity and high-risk operation. Some media commentators said that the government seemed to be improvising its policy in an atmosphere of confusion and was not being helped by the absence on foreign trips of President Mitterrand and several key ministers.

Many of the estimated 500 troops in Gikongoro, from where the sounds of RPF gunfire can be heard, are as unhappy as many African leaders at France's decision to "draw a line in the sand" to stop the rebel advance. One commando summed up the attitude of many soldiers when he said : "This seems crazy, we are protecting the killers."

But commanders are adamant that they will stand and fight if the RPF advances towards their positions around Gikongoro, recently reinforced by 300 Foreign Legionnaires and marine artillerymen.

The French have also sent in

about a dozen helicopters and reinforced their special forces who first occupied Gikongoro with heavy weapons, anti-tank missiles and other high-technology weapons with which to counter the lightly armed but fast-moving rebels. Colonel Jacques Rosier, the commander of the operation in western Rwanda who has been told to block the rebel advance, said yesterday that the only people who would be allowed to carry arms behind government lines would be re-

gular soldiers.

The government army, which throughout the civil war has preferred to fight behind lines of women, children or militias, was leaving the town as fast as possible. Those who stayed behind started drinking at first light yesterday morning. By noon a bar full of drunken men who claimed to be commandos in the Rwandan army said they would “slaughter” the rebels if they advanced.