

Hutu Commander Says French Troops Give him Strategic Boost

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RWANKUBA, Rwanda (AP) – Lt. Col. Edward Gasarabwe is charged with keeping the government’s shrinking piece of Rwanda from being cut in half by the rebels - a battle he expects to win if the French keep moving deeper into Rwanda.

France says it has come to Rwanda for humanitarian reasons. But the Hutu commander said the French army that once trained his officers could, by its mere presence, thwart the rebels’ wildly successful tactic of indirect jabs and infiltration of the army’s flanks.

“We won’t have to retreat anymore,” Gasarabwe said in an unusually frank interview Monday about his army’s crippled supply lines and numerous retreats, its training of murderous civilian militias and its difficulties in smuggling adequate arms from neighboring Zaire.

Gasarabwe took over the command of four battalions of 2,800 troops at a critical front-line position in south-central Rwanda on Friday, part of a massive reshuffling of the beleaguered national army.

“The rebels are moving too fast,” said Gasarabwe, 39. “I’m here to stop them. If I don’t, I’m gone.”

He has set up his command post in a small house on a hill just 2,000

yards from the nearest rebel position to send a message to a battered national army suddenly buoyed by the reassuring presence of France, which armed and trained the troops when the rebels first launched their rebellion four years ago.

“I set my command post so close to the front to keep my men from leaving,” he said.

On Saturday, the rebels launched a raid on the command post and got within 1,000 yards, said Maj. Gerard Ntanagezo, Gasarabwe’s aide.

The national army, dominated by the majority Hutu people, is battling the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi-led rebel movement that launched an invasion from Uganda in December 1990.

Gasarabwe said he was the army’s training instructor at the time and worked closely with the French military advisers.

The two sides reached a preliminary peace accord last year. But the April 6 death of Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana in a mysterious plane crash ignited a wave of massacres.

An estimated 200,000 people, most of them Tutsis and many of them women and children, have been killed.

The RPF renewed its rebellion af-

ter the massacres began and has steadily pushed the government army to the western border. The national army only controls one-third of the country and lost key sections of the capital, Kigali, and the strategic city of Gitarama in the past month.

Gasarabwe was the commander of the former government stronghold of Byumba, which fell two months ago. He said the army "sacrificed" the city in order to send additional troops to Kigali, but it subsequently suffered serious setbacks there.

Rwankuba is a small village packed with troops about 13 miles from Gitarama and some 30 miles southwest of Kigali. Gasarabwe's troops are defending a critical area from just south of Gitarama to the southwestern city of Butare.

Soldiers are dug into the hills, trading machine gun and mortar fire with rebel forces on the nearby hills.

They are defending the key east-west road from Gitarama to the Zairean border town of Kibuye, which if captured would split the government territory in two.

Gasarabwe said he also is trying to recapture the main north-south road 12 miles away that connects Gitarama to Kigali and the capital to Uganda, the main rebel supply route.

A key to his success, he said, is the French troops. He said the army has been forced to retreat in order to protect civilian populations from the quick raids the rebel guerrillas have carried out on the army's flanks and infiltration of the civilian population behind the front-line troops.

With the French defending the civilian population and the flanks, he said the army could concentrate on the front.

"The French are going to take care of the people," he said. "If the French are protecting the population we won't have to back up. The French are not in the fighting zone yet, so we don't know what is going to happen."

"It depends on what the French mission actually is," he said - something wondered by much of the world.

Gasarabwe was blunt about the shape of his army. The rebel advances have crippled supply lines and the rebels have more weapons. He figures his force of 2,800 soldiers is facing three or four rebel battalions.

The arms being smuggled through Zaire, he said, "are not enough."

"I don't understand why there is an international blockade against my troops and not the RPF," he said. "They say we are massacring people, so there is a blockade. It's unfair that Uganda supplies the RPF."

The rebels have portrayed themselves as coming to save the nation from massacres of Tutsis and Hutus considered RPF supporters.

Most of the massacres have been blamed on the Hutu militias that Gasarabwe acknowledged were formed and trained by the military, but only to detect RPF infiltrators, he said.

"The military did organize the militias. It was necessary for civilian defense," he said. "The RPF infiltrated. It's not possible for the military to protect all the population. It was up to the militias."

"That was the reason for the massacres, to remove the infiltration threat," he said. "There are people who support the RPF even here."

Though massacre survivors disagree, he said the army did not take part in mass killings.

The appalling level of slaughter

in villages across the country drew unprecedented attention to this tiny Central African country. Gasarabwe conceded that perhaps some innocent people were killed during the purported purges of RPF supporters.

“Yes. If someone goes into RPF territory to get food, then comes back, it’s hard to say if they were RPF.”

He said the rebels have killed more innocent people and have used skilled propaganda to win global support, installing a Hutu as its president to give the appearance that the rebellion is multiethnic.

“The RPF initially said it was fighting to return Tutsi refugees home,

then they began incorporating Hutus so it wouldn’t be said it was an ethnic problem,” he said. “They were very smart to select as their president a Hutu. That man won’t live long, because the Tutsis will kill him.”

He said the national army also has Tutsis in its ranks, though none in command posts. He said there have been ethnic conflicts within the ranks.

“Some of their families were massacred, and they were angry” he said. “We’re trying to sensitize people. The Hutu-Tutsi problem is not really a concern of the army. Historically, the Hutus and the Tutsis have never really understood each other.”