

France puts its African troops on alert

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PARIS, April 7 (Reuter) - France has put soldiers in former African colonies on alert following the killing of the leaders of Rwanda and Burundi, but has no plans to send troops to the two countries, military sources said on Thursday.

Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundi President Cyprien Ntaryamira died in a rocket attack that destroyed their plane on Wednesday as they flew back to the Rwandan capital of Kigali from regional peace talks.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Richard Duque said France deplored their deaths.

"If it were confirmed that the plane was shot down, France could only condemn such an act," he said, adding that Paris had asked for an international investigation into the explosion, which also killed the crew of three French nationals.

Government authorities said the decision to put the 8,600 French soldiers spread throughout central and

western Africa on alert was a routine move.

"In circumstances like this it is usual for precautionary measures to be taken," Duque told reporters at a daily briefing.

France has some 4,600 soldiers in the Central African Republic, Chad, Gabon, Ivory Coast and Senegal, the sources said. Another 4,000 are stationed in the Red Sea port of Djibouti.

Paris, which for several years had about 300 soldiers in Rwanda, withdrew its remaining contingents from the tiny central African country last December. They were replaced by a United Nations peacekeeping force.

France has a small number of military technical advisers in both Rwanda and Burundi, Duque said.

"There is no movement of French troops planned into Rwanda or Burundi at the present time," the military official said.

U.N. officials said on Thursday that presidential guards abducted

three Rwandan government ministers and three U.N. military observers in Kigali.

“United Nations forces must be able to continue their mission,” Duque said.

“France appeals to all leaders for calm to be maintained in both countries so that this tragic event will not

lead to violence,” he said.

There are some 600 French nationals in Rwanda, most in Kigali, and about 700 in Burundi, mostly in Bujumbura, Duque said, adding that the situation in the two countries did not prompt any “particular anxiety”.

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