

France sends 400 soldiers to evacuate Rwanda

Fontanaud, Helene

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PARIS, April 9 (Reuter) - France sent 400 soldiers to the Rwandan capital Kigali on Saturday to prepare the evacuation of French and other foreign nationals after two days of tribal bloodletting in the country.

The armed forces chief of staff, Admiral Jacques Lanxade, told a news conference that 280 paratroops landed at dawn in Kigali and 120 more men would be flown in later in the day.

In an operation code-named "Amaryllis", the French troops seized control of Kigali airport after being flown in aboard five Transall C-160 transport planes from positions in the Central African Republic.

The soldiers were preparing to transfer French nationals from the centre of Kigali, Lanxade said.

"Right now there is fighting between the city and the airport," Lanxade said. "So we need reinforcements, which we are sending in, to ensure the safe transfer."

General Philippe Mercier said the reinforcements would have to arrive before foreigners could be flown out.

French government workers whose presence was not vital would be taken out but there was no general evacuation order for the entire 600-odd French community in Rwanda, Lanxade said.

A Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said French nationals who wanted to leave Rwanda would be given the chance to do so.

"We have taken necessary steps to allow those of our countrymen who wish to leave to do so, and the taking of control of the (Kigali) airport is a first phase aiming to permit such departures," the spokeswoman said.

The situation in Kigali remained tense and precarious, the spokeswoman said.

Other officials said shooting had resumed after a period of calm, and rebels had infiltrated the city. "The calm is not likely to last much longer," one official said.

Lanxade said the situation in Rwanda was "worrisome but we now have forces in place to face the emergency". He added :

"What scares us is the possible resumption of fighting between rebels in the north of the country and Rwandan armed forces, and that the fighting would take place near or even in the city, with much more intensity than what we've seen so far."

A businessman in Rwanda told French radio that French soldiers had taken position at Paris' embassy in Kigali and were clearing the main streets of the city.

Lanxade said a French priest was killed in northern Rwanda on Wednesday and two French government workers were believed to have been killed in Kigali. A third worker was missing.

Although French nationals were not under general threat, the situation could change if Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels gained control of Kigali, Lanxade said.

"We must not forget that the rebels are less than 50 kilometres (30 miles) from the capital," Mercier said.

French nationals living in northern Rwanda were grouping together and might flee to neighbouring Zaire, he said.

Most of the 600 French nationals in Rwanda live in Kigali.

Belgium, which also sent paratroops to Rwanda on Saturday, has 1,500 nationals in its former colony.

The French troops and planes came from the Central African Republic capital Bangui, where Paris normally has 1,300 soldiers, five Jaguar fighter-bombers and three Transall C-160 transport planes.

Its Bangui forces were reinforced by troops and materiel sent from elsewhere in Africa, where France has a total of 8,600 soldiers.

France, which for several years had about 300 soldiers in Rwanda, withdrew its remaining contingent last December. They were replaced by United Nations troops. France still has a small number of military technical advisers in Rwanda and Burundi.

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