

French commandos arrive in Rwanda to a barrage of flowers

Sam Kiley

The Times, June 24, 1994, page 12

FRENCH marine commandos went to the rescue of Rwanda's few remaining populations of Tutsi people yesterday and were showered with flowers by the very people who for three months have been murdering Tutsis as a national sport.

The 150 lightly armed special forces soldiers from the 11 Airborne Division who flew into Bukavu in the neighbouring Zaire yesterday morning looked stony-faced as bougainvillea blossoms were tossed over their red berets.

"It's like being kissed on the lips by the devil's dead sister," said one soldier lighting his pipe as if to ward off the stench of death caused by massacres organised by the Rwandan government and local government officials, like Cyangugu's prefect, Emmanuel Bagambiki, who was on hand to greet Colonel Didier Thibaut, as his men rode into his town. Before the prefect could say a word, the colonel, aware that the world was uneasy about whether the French forces being sent into Rwanda with United Nations backing would in fact back its protégé government against advancing rebels, or stick to its genuine mandate, made his aims rudely clear.

"We are not here to be aggressive. Only to protect the vulnerable popu-

lations. Tell that to your army (the local military commander was three feet away) and tell that to the militia. They are now out of business," he said.

The government militia, known as the *Interahamwe* – those who kill together – have been blamed for the bulk of the half million murders committed in Rwanda since April. The prefect insisted that there were not, and has not been, any militia in the area. "My eye," was the reply.

An onlooker, Gaspar Karitane, was overjoyed at the sight of the French. Like his enemies in the Rwandan Patriotic Front, he clearly believed that they were coming to join with the government forces to fight the rebels, as the French have in the past. "We were abandoned. Now we are not alone, we are part of the international community," he said.

Colonel Thibaut, who led the French arrival in Baidoa, Somalia's most blighted town two years ago, left his escort to drive to the limits of Cyangugu, on the shores of lake Kivu. On the edge of the town, where the day before militiamen armed with pangas and clubs screened vehicles for Tutsis and would kill any they found, the barricade was festooned with the Tricolore and palm fronds. Standing by were

men now armed with tree branches rather than the medieval weapons they have come to love and use with abandon.

The French colonel made no effort to hide his contempt for the militia, the Rwandan military and the political leadership present. But when the French column arrived at Nyarushishi a valley set amid tea plantations where 8,000 Tutsi were evacuated from Cyangugu stadium after being trapped there for weeks the reception was no less joyous, but the colonel looked happy to have arrived.

“Check how the so-called army of

Rwanda is doing its security around here, and then we will show them how to do it. Any incidents of violence must be reported to me” he snapped to his major.

The Italian government announced yesterday that it was sending 460 troops to join the international intervention effort, but insisted that they would not be deployed inside Rwanda until both warring sides agreed. More French soldiers will be sent in Rwanda in the next few days.

From Sam Kiley in Cyangugu, Rwanda.