

Kigali [”The French brought in artillery guns”]

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”We were living in an area where there was fighting,” said a European aid worker who declined to be named.

”The French brought in artillery guns in the morning. No one saw them fire, but we were told that they helped the Rwandans set the guns up and told them how to aim and when to fire. At night they took the guns away,” said the aid worker, later evacuated from the combat zone but still in Rwanda.

The report was strongly denied by French diplomats and military officials here.

Rumours in Kigali last week that two French soldiers had been killed remained unconfirmed, and the report was dismissed by French diplomats who stressed that Paris wanted a United Nations force to take over in Rwanda.

Faustin Twagiramungu, chairman of the opposition Mouvement Democratique Republicain (MDR) party, said: ”If French soldiers are close to the front, they’re there to

fight.” The MDR’s Dismas Nsengiyaremye is prime minister of the coalition government in which four opposition parties are represented.

Western diplomats speculate that Paris wants to preserve a balance between French-speaking Rwanda, a former Belgian colony, and English-speaking Uganda which has been accused of backing and arming the rebels.

Most rebels are exiles of the minority Tutsi tribe driven from Rwanda after losing a power struggle to the majority Hutus three decades ago.

”The French seem to see Rwanda as a kind of front line between English- and French-speaking Africa,” said a diplomat here. ”Most of the RPF leaders are English-speakers educated in Uganda or Tanzania. If they took power, Rwanda might have closer links with former British colonies.”

French diplomats and Rwandan officials claim that entire Ugandan

army units are fighting in Rwanda with the rebels.

Paris last week stressed that "France's sole preoccupation is the search for a political solution" to the conflict in Rwanda.

The decision to send further French troops to Rwanda was intended "to ensure the security of French nationals", a foreign ministry spokesman insisted.

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