

France likely to fly other westerners from Rwanda

Graves, Nelson

Reuters, April 10, 1994

PARIS, April 10 (Reuter) - France said it expected to rescue all its remaining nationals from war-ravaged Rwanda on Sunday and then would probably begin flying other endangered westerners to safety.

"We think that our 600 countrymen can be totally evacuated during the day," Cooperation Minister Michel Roussin told French radio.

As of Sunday morning some 150 of the 600-strong French community in strife-torn Rwanda had been evacuated, most in two airlifts from the capital Kigali.

A first batch of French citizens was expected to arrive in Paris late on Sunday after stopping over in either the Central African Republic capital of Bangui or the Burundi capital of Bujumbura, the Foreign Ministry said.

Roussin said the French evacuation mission "Amaryllis", involving nearly 500 paratroopers and five military transport planes, was operating smoothly and enabling a quick exodus.

The French forces will "probably have a role to play" in evacuating the 1,500 Belgians, 300 Americans and more than 200 other Europeans from the central African country, he said.

"Our operation is working, our capacity enables us to evacuate very quickly," Roussin said. "The Belgians are in reserve, the Americans are in Bujumbura and a plane is arriving from Italy."

Roussin, in charge of French policy in Africa, reiterated that French troops would not intervene in fighting, largely along tribal lines, between government and rebel troops.

The rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) was quoted as saying it was prepared to attack French paratroopers if they intervened in the ethnic conflict.

The rebels suspect France, which until recently had several hundred soldiers in Rwanda, of siding with the Hutu majority. The RPF, with a force of about 10,000 guerrillas, is predominantly of the minority but formerly ruling Tutsi tribe.

"France has always been neutral in this matter between the Hutus and Tutsis," Roussin said. "We have always sought to bring peace to Rwanda. This is a problem the Rwandans must settle together."

However, Roussin acknowledged some Rwandans had escaped with French nationals. "There are very strong ties between some French and Rwandan families," he said.

About 10 members of the family of late Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana, killed when a rocket hit his plane as it landed in Kigali last Wednesday, were reported to be on the first French plane to leave the Rwandan capital on Saturday.

Roussin also said some Rwandan authorities, fearing slaughter, were holed up in the French embassy in Kigali. "We will continue to protect them," he said.

France, anxious to avoid jeopardising its perilous evacuation mission, has repeatedly emphasised it is neutral.

But French troops were allied with government forces in holding Kigali airport. While France withdrew 300 soldiers from Rwanda last December, it has kept a small number of military advisers in the country.

France sent several hundred troops to Rwanda after RPF rebels invaded from Uganda in October 1990. The last French troops were pulled out last December and replaced by a United Nations peacekeeping force.

(c) Reuters Limited 1994