

France, Uganda accused over Rwanda fighting

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CYUMBA COMMUNE, Rebel-held Rwanda, Feb 14 (AFP) - A new rebel onslaught against government forces accused of tribal massacres has added a new chapter to Rwanda's blood-steeped recent history and uprooted half a million people.

The crisis prompted France to double the number of its troops in Rwanda to 300, officially to protect several hundred French residents of the tiny central African state.

They reportedly evacuated some 70 expatriates last week from the north-western town of Ruhengeri, a government stronghold near President Juvenal Habyarimana's home region where the army is holding out against rebels who attacked from three sides.

But the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) says French soldiers are fighting alongside government forces.

"The French should support the peace process," said RPF military chief Paul Kagame. "Instead of being part of the problem, they should be

part of the solution."

RPF guerrillas based near the northern border with Uganda have advanced southwards to within 30 kilometres (20 miles) of Kigali, the closest they have come to the capital in the 28-month bush war that has ruined Rwanda's economy.

Their offensive has shaken Habyarimana's grip on his country and stalled talks in Tanzania on the implementation of a ceasefire accord signed seven months ago.

France has condemned the rebels for breaking the ceasefire. But Kagame said the offensive launched last Monday was in retaliation to the massacre of more than 300 Tutsi peasants, the RPF's main support base, allegedly by the army, dominated by the majority Hutu tribe.

The RPF has declared a truce and called for new negotiations. But fighting seems to be continuing despite a lull Saturday, and talks have yet to resume.

Government radio says 550,000

people have fled the hostilities, including 350,000 already in displaced people's camps forced to uproot themselves for the second time since the RPF invaded from neighbouring Uganda in October 1990.

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