

Rwandan Rebels Seize Capital And Second City.

Sam Kiley, Charles Bremner

The Times, July 5, 1994

From Sam Kiley in Butare and Charles Bremner in Paris.

REBELS of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) yesterday took control of Kigali, the country's capital, and Butare, its second largest city. The rebels now control at least 75% of the country and are likely to set up an interim administration and seek international recognition.

The assaults on the two centres drove out tens of thousands of civilians and soldiers. With the fall of the two main cities, an estimated 50,000 people, including thousands of Tutsi who have been in hiding to escape massacre, will be able to venture out without fear.

However, French forces, originally charged with protecting and evacuating civilians, have now been ordered to stop the westward advance of the rebels and to set up a humanitarian "safe haven". French helicopters flew relays to the southwestern town of Gikongoro as "Operation Turquoise" was put on a war footing to meet the RPF.

The westward push by the rebels has made progress every day recently, and they are now less than ten miles from where the advance parties of French troops are encamped in Gikongoro, 18 miles west of Butare.

The new hardened French attitude

to the rebels marks a big departure from the government's initial pledge to stay clear of the fighting. The rebels have been warned to stay clear of the safe area around Gikongoro and south of Lake Kivu, near the border with Zaire, or face the fire of the French forces. Colonel Didier Thibaut, the local French commander, said: "We have the means, and soon we will have more ... if the RPF comes here and threatens the population, we will fire on them without hesitation."

Ordinary French soldiers are determined to carry out their orders, but they cannot hide their anger at what they see as being left out on a limb by the international community. Above all, they see Britain as having failed to meet its responsibilities. A French corporal said: "The British know nothing about food and everything about war. Our history teaches us to view them with respect in this matter, but we cannot respect people who will not come and stand by our side when we are sent on a mission to save lives."

The new French action is being taken as it becomes clear that the Rwandan government, based at Gisenyi, on the border with Zaire, has lost control of its battered army.

Last night in Paris, Admiral Jacques Lanxade, France's Chief of the General Staff, said that the safe

zone, which covers about a fifth of Rwanda, was now in effect. No fighting would be permitted within it. All sides, he said, had been asked to ensure "that there is no penetration by armed units". Any French military intervention, he emphasised, would take place to protect threatened civilians from "armed bands".

The frontier of the French zone passed east of Gikongoro, Admiral Lanxade said, adding: "We have asked the RPF not to enter the zone and we think they will comply." Other defence officials said the appeal to the RPF and to the Rwandan army to call a halt to the fighting in the area around Gikongoro was being made by French diplomats directly or through intermediaries.

The plan for a security zone has set Paris on a course of confrontation with the rebels. From the outset, the RPF has depicted the French mission as a colonial exercise intended to prop up the Kigali regime, a long-standing client of Paris.

"If the French create that zone, they are only protecting the Hutu army and its killer militias," James Rwego, the Brussels representative of the rebel forcess, said.

Despite the new Paris hard line, French officials who, like their troops, are bitter over the lack of support from African and European states, insist that their troops' actions in Rwanda are designed to be purely humanitarian. "Despite the deteriorating situation and the intensified fighting, we are resolutely continuing our humanitarian operation," a Foreign Ministry spokesman said.

Francois Leotard, the Defence Minister, yesterday complained about the "strange and painful impotence of Africa" in the Rwandan conflict. "Why

should we not say that we are experiencing a sense of failure from the weak African participation in a solution to the Rwandan crisis," he wrote in *Le Monde*. He also called on Europe to work with African states to create a multi-national rapid-intervention force dedicated to dealing with crises on the continent.

France expects to receive swift United Nations endorsement for its humanitarian area. French troops, the government believes, will be empowered by the UN to use force if necessary to prevent any military infiltration into the area. With France's small but well-armed intervention force faced with the possibility of all-out battle, tension was running high in the Defence Ministry and the Foreign Ministry yesterday. In just a short time, the French will have to disarm the Hutu forces who dominate their safe zone, or appear in the eyes of the Tutsi and the world as defenders of the routed government side. There certainly appears little chance that French forces can be withdrawn by July 31 as Edouard Balladur, the Prime Minister, promised last month.

With the exception of the Communist Party, which opposed the French intervention, public and media opinion remains firmly behind the operation. Commentators continue to echo the official line that France is engaged in an altruistic and thankless mission that deserved a better reception from its allies.

Le Monde said there were only two choices now in Rwanda. Either the RPF agreed to halt its advance, accepted the French safe zone and agreed to the principle of a political solution to the war, or the French force would have to leave, "abandoning hundreds of thousands of Rwandans who will be exposed to new extermination".