

Paris [France early Saturday landed troops at Kigali airport]

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PARIS, April 9 (AFP) - France early Saturday landed troops at Kigali airport at the start of an operation to protect French citizens stranded in civil war-torn Rwanda.

Some 280 French marines were landed by military transport planes which flew in from Bangui, in Central Africa, the French defence ministry said.

The French foreign ministry said the troops were sent "to ensure the security necessary for a possible evacuation of French citizens".

But the defence ministry later said no decision had yet been taken on the evacuation of French citizens who are believed to number about 600.

"We are waiting to see what is happening on the ground, if calm is returning or not," a spokesman at the defence ministry said.

Fighters in Rwanda had earlier agreed on a ceasefire and on forming

a transitional government, according to New Zealand's UN Ambassador Colin Keating, the current Security Council chief, in New York.

The ceasefire, which was to have come into force Friday evening, did not take hold immediately, but "by all accounts the level of fighting has diminished significantly," according to a UN statement.

The landing of the French troops at Kigali airport went off without trouble, the defence ministry said.

The runways were clear when the four Transall transport planes landed at the airport which was held by Rwandan government forces.

Three of the four planes left immediately after dropping off the soldiers and two jeeps.

"The difficulty is between the airport and the town and we shall see this Saturday how the situation evolves," a defence ministry spokesman said.

Belgium, which has troops serving with the UN in Rwanda, was informed of the French move, but was not involved in the operation, the spokesman also said.

Ethnic violence in Rwanda has reportedly left thousands dead since Wednesday, when an aircraft carrying the presidents of Rwanda and neighboring Burundi crashed and killed both leaders. The dead in subsequent bloodshed included the Rwandan prime minister and 10 UN peacekeepers from Belgium.

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