French Soldiers: A Private Initiative?

One of the needs mentioned by Rwabalinda was "foreign soldiers," whether regulars or mercenaries, to serve as "instructors." Captain Paul Barril, the former French policeman who had served as security consultant to Habyarimana, may have agreed to fill that need. Barril was reportedly linked to the French president directly as well as through Mitterrand's confidant De Grossouvre, who committed suicide at the presidency on April 7 (see above). According to one press report, a high-ranking military officer was so suspicious of Barril's activities in Rwanda in 1993 that he questioned Mitterrand directly about them, fearing that the president might be compromised by what Barril was doing. Mitterrand reportedly replied that Barril had received no orders from him.100

Barril claims to have been present in Rwanda from the beginning of the genocide through to its end. He maintains that he was one of the last to leave Kigali before the RPF victory, taken out by helicopter. In fact, he was in Europe for at least part of the period—he appeared on television at the end of June to describe his theory about how the RPF shot down Habyarimana's plane—but he seems to have been in Kigali on April 6 or soon after. He provides no specifics of his activities but relates that the Rwandans were so panic-stricken by Habyarimana's death that they "were running around like rabbits" and that senior officers of the Rwandan army, notably General Bizimungu, needed to turn to him for advice. The situation was "unimaginable," he says, explaining that this was "deepest Africa."101 Barril declared that he acted on his own and "did not have to await for agreement from the ministry of foreign affairs to intervene," yet he also claims that he resided at the French embassy during the time after April 12 when he was in Kigali.102 He says that he raised the flag over the embassy and that this pleased Rwandans who were waiting for the French to return.103

Rwandan military sources, assert that Barril was hired by the Rwandan Ministry of Defense to conduct a training program for 30 to 60 men, eventually to grow to 120, at Bigogwe military camp in the northwest. He was to provide training in marksmanship and infiltration tactics for an elite unit in preparation forattacks behind the RPF lines. The operation was code-named "Operation Insecticide," meaning an operation to exterminate the inyenzi or "cockroaches." In late April or early May, commanders of army and National Police units were ordered to recruit volunteers for the program. In June, Rwandan military officers decided to offer rewards to encourage participants in the training program to attack behind the RPF lines, which were vulnerable because stretched over a long distance. But the military situation changed too rapidly for them to put the decision into effect.104

According to Sébastien Ntahobari, then military attaché at the Rwandan embassy in Paris, Minister of Defense Bizimana transferred U.S.$1,200,000 from Nairobi to Paris in June 1994 and faxed Ntahobari to pay that sum to Barril for otherwise unspecified "services and assistance." An assistant of Barril came to collect the money from the embassy.105

When asked about the training program in the course of an interview with a Human Rights Watch researcher, Barril denied knowledge of it and ended the conversation abruptly.106

UNAMIR, Rwandan army officers and RPF sources all reported seeing several white men in military uniform in Rwanda—and not part of UNAMIR—in early April and again after mid-May. Three or four French-speaking white men in military uniform ate at the Rwandan army officers' mess for several days in April and then left Kigali by helicopter for the northwest. Two or three, who spoke French and carried a considerable amount of gear, were transported to Bigogwe by Rwandan army helicopter in mid-May. They engaged in conversation with a Rwandan army officer and indicated by their questions that they were not familiar with Rwanda. According to one witness, the pilot of the helicopter was white and French-speaking.107 At about this time, UNAMIR officers reported seeing whitesin military uniform driving rapidly through Kigali on two occasions.108 A Rwandan army officer and RPF sources both recall

seeing one or more French-speaking soldiers at the Hotel Meridien in Gisenyi.109 Other testimony reports French-speaking soldiers in the southern part of the country at about this same time.110 When questioned about the reported presence of French-speaking soldiers in Rwanda at a time when regular troops were supposed to have left, one French officer replied that they were probably mercenaries.111 If that were the case, it leaves unresolved the further question of whether Captain Barril or any other private agent had formal or informal support from French authorities in providing mercenaries to the Rwandan government.

Operation Turquoise

In mid-June, the French foreign minister announced that France would send troops to Rwanda "to stop the massacres and to protect the populations threatened with extermination."112 At the time, French political leaders labored to convince press and public of the humanitarian nature of the operation and four years later they were still defending the reasons for undertaking it. Even those reportedly opposed to Operation Turquoise in 1994, such as then Prime Minister Edouard Balladur, responded angrily to criticism sparked by the National Assembly inquiry in 1998. Balladur insisted that France had sent its soldiers because it had a "duty to try to save lives." He found it "revolting" that others who had done nothing brought charges against France, "the only country in the world to have acted."113

Posturing and self-congratulation aside, Operation Turquoise did have another purpose besides saving lives: preventing a victory by the RPF. One observer reportsthat some military officers in Paris talked openly of "breaking the back of the RPF."114 Others, like General Jean-Claude Lafourcade, commander of Operation Turquoise, spoke more discreetly of "putting the Arusha Accords back into operation," meaning implementing an agreement which required the RPF to share power with other parties.115 The investigative commission of the National Assembly concluded that besides saving lives Operation Turquoise was meant to preserve the necessary conditions for a cease-fire and subsequent political negotiations, that is, "territory and legitimacy" for the interim government.116

Mitterrand, who apparently continued to play the major role in determining policy towards Rwanda throughout the months of the genocide, reportedly disavowed Habyarimana's successors by mid-June, calling them "a bunch of killers."117 According to former minister Bernard Debré, Mitterrand held that these Rwandan leaders could no longer be supported and must be punished "not only because there had been a genocide but also because his trust had been betrayed."118 Mitterrand remained convinced, however, that "maintaining Hutu in power was the democratic thing to do." Whatever Mitterrand's personal repugnance towards the "bunch of killers," the French government had no immediate candidates to replace them. This, according to the commission, led France into the "untenable situation" of continuing to accept the legitimacy of the interim government, "either not taking account of the reality of the genocide, or not analyzing the responsibilities of the interim government for it."119

The French may have been planning a military intervention as early as the first part of May when, according to Rwabalinda, General Huchon said that the militarycooperation service was preparing some way to help the Rwandan army. According to the Rwandan military attaché Ntahobari, the coded telephone discussed with Rwabalinda was meant to facilitate communications for Operation Turquoise "which was being prepared," even at that time.120

Two or three weeks later—in late May or early June—the French "invited" the U.S. to join a military operation in Rwanda, hoping to obtain at least air transport for the undertaking. The U.S. refused—a decision "overshadowed by the ghost of Somalia," according to one Washington official. In addition to general concerns about becoming involved in an intractable conflict in Africa, the U.S. saw no interest in assisting the French to slow the advance of the

RPF or to prop up the interim government. Policymakers in Washington, including those who did not favor the RPF, saw its victory as the most likely way to end the genocide.121

According to Gérard Prunier, who advised the Ministry of Defense on Operation Turquoise, Mitterrand was finally pushed into action in mid-June by the prospect that South Africa—another "Anglo-Saxon" country—might intervene in Rwanda. Humanitarian and human rights organizations had also been attacking French policy in Rwanda with increasing vigor throughout the end of May and early June and officials were anxious to quiet this criticism and, if possible, restore French honor.122 While these considerations may have had their impact on thinking in Paris, the decision to act quickly in mid-June was more likely influenced by a serious deterioration in the position of Rwandan government forces. After a counter-offensive against the RPF failed in early June, the government army also lost the important town of Gitarama on June 13, leaving the way to the west largely free for further RPF advances. The government forces still held part of Kigali, but they were short on ammunition—apparently in part because officers in the northwestern town of Ruhengeri were hoarding their stock awaiting the French return in hopes of then launching an effective counterattack. General Bizimungu assessed the overall situation as hopeless and commented privately on June 17 that the government forces had lost the war.123

Mitterrand at first insisted that French troops must take control of all of Rwanda, a position he may have adopted under the influence of military officers like General Quesnot, who takes credit for persuading Mitterrand to intervene in the first place.124 But Prime Minister Balladur firmly opposed such a large undertaking and the two compromised on a less ambitious objective, apparently that of establishing French authority over the part of Rwanda still controlled by the Rwandan government forces.125 At the U.N., French diplomats who were trying to rally support for Operation Turquoise at first showed a map with a proposed zone of French control that would have encompassed all territory west of a line running from Ruhengeri in the north, southeast to Kigali, then southwest down to Butare. This area would have encompassed Gisenyi, where the interim government had taken refuge, as well as the larger northwestern region that was the home of Habyarimana and many of the leading officers of the Rwandan army. This zone, where the government forces had concentrated substantial troops and supplies, would have served as the best location from which to launch a counteroffensive. Some important actors at the U.N.—including the U.S.—expressed hesitations about French plans to move into an area that was so large and so likely to provoke confrontations with the RPF. Prunier and others voiced the same reservations in Paris.126

Proponents of an aggressive strategy thought it essential for French troops to arrive in Kigali. By establishing a French presence there, they could enable the interim government to hang on to control of some parts of the city and thus more credibly claim to still govern Rwanda. Given that Operation Turquoise was supposedly a humanitarian operation, some French officials expected to find support for their position with humanitarian activists. The activist and politician Bernard Kouchner was one who had become known for his efforts to save lives. The RPF had solicited his aid in arranging for the evacuation of orphans and others besieged in Kigali and the U.N. secretary-general had given him an informal mandate to support his activities. Kouchner was ready to argue the case for sending French troops to the capital. On June 17, he and a French colleague visited General Dallaire in Kigali. According to one person present at the interview, the two Frenchvisitors brought with them a map marked with a line to delineate the zone that might come under French control. Like the map shown by French representatives at the U.N., it included most of western Rwanda and parts of the city of Kigali. Kouchner reportedly urged Dallaire to ask for French troops to rescue orphans and missionaries trapped behind "Interahamwe lines" in the capital. Such a plea by Dallaire might have persuaded sceptics at the U.N. or in Paris to agree to sending French forces to Kigali. Dallaire, suspicious of French intentions, responded, "Hell, no. I don't want to see any French around

here. If you want to help, provide the troops waiting to join UNAMIR with the transport and equipment they need."127 Kouchner confirms having made the visit and having brought along a map, which he remembers showing sites in Kigali where Tutsi or others were awaiting rescue. He recalls that he was given the map by officials in Paris, but not by whom.128 With no appeal forthcoming from Dallaire, proponents of a relatively limited operation influenced the plan adopted. Prime Minister Balladur set a number of conditions for the undertaking, one of which was that it was to be based largely outside Rwanda—in effect in Zaire—with its troops making forays into Rwanda to assess the situation and to rescue people as needed.129

François Léotard, minister of defense in 1994, declared at the National Assembly hearings that orders for Operation Turquoise "prohibited French soldiers from making hostile military contact with the RPF."130 At least one set of orders, those issued June 22, 1994, do not prohibit engaging in combat with the RPF. Leaving vague the actions to be undertaken, they focus on shaping how those actions might be interpreted:

Adopt an attitude of strict neutrality to the different parties to the conflict. Insist on the idea that the French army has come to stop the massacres and notto fight the RPF or to support the FAR so that the actions undertaken not be interpreted as aiding the government troops.131

In explaining the context of the operation, the orders echoed the language of the interim government. They described "very serious ethnic clashes" and never mentioned the word "genocide" which had been used by Foreign Minister Juppé and other civilian officials more than a month before. They devote three paragraphs to recounting the RPF military advance and only then turn to the slaughter of Tutsi, which is laid to "groups of uncontrolled Hutu civilians and soldiers." The orders state that the RPF seems to have also engaged in little known summary executions and "ethnic cleansing" and that "several hundred thousand persons of the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups" have been exterminated. By citing the Hutu first, they suggest that as many Hutu as Tutsi have been killed—or perhaps, even more.132 Given that the mission of the troops was to stop the massacres, using force if necessary, the identification of Hutu as victims and the RPF as killers implied that soldiers could well be drawn into fighting the RPF.

When plans for the operation were discussed, Prunier had argued for sending troops into southwestern Rwanda at Cyangugu. From there, they could move quickly to rescue Tutsi at Nyarushishi, which would produce excellent publicity for the operation and firmly establish its humanitarian character. He had pointed out that sending troops into Rwanda at Gisenyi in the northwest might raise questions about the professed goal of saving lives since there were virtually no Tutsi left to save in that region. According to Prunier, Léotard was convinced by his logic and ordered the operation to proceed through Cyangugu. The military commanders also appeared to have accepted Prunier's reasoning: they ordered the troops to first assure protection for the Nyarushishi camp "to demonstrate the humanitarian character of the operation." Only after that were they to extend their area of control progressively over "Hutu country" and to move out from southwestern Rwanda towards Gisenyi in the northwest, towards Butare due east, and even "in the direction of Kigali."133 As the French commanders must have known, their troops could not progress too far in those directions without encountering the RPF.

According to press accounts, the soldiers themselves believed that they were supposed to fight against the RPF. One officer stated, "At that time, the orders were very clear: it was planned to go as far as Kigali."134 The soldiers were drawn from the elite of the reconnaissance and rapid reaction units. They included nearly 300 soldiers of the French special forces, more than had been deployed in any previous French operation.135 Some, including several of the commanding officers, had previously served in Rwanda where their task had been to support the Rwandan troops in fighting the RPF, and for many of them the RPF had become their enemy as well. They had resented being withdrawn the year before in a move which had seemed to hand the RPF a victory and they were ready to "kick butt" according to one U.S. military officer

who talked frequently with several of them.136 The soldiers were well equipped to do just that with more than one hundred armored vehicles, a battery of 120mm. mortars, ten helicopters, four ground-attack jet planes and four reconnaissance jet planes. Amply supplied with heavy weaponry, the force lacked the ordinary vehicles, like trucks, needed to pick up civilians and ferry them to safety.137

The French authorities had initially hoped for some kind of international intervention, but in the end found only the Senegalese willing to send soldiers for the operation. They asked the Security Council for a Chapter VII mandate to cover Operation Turquoise, thus following the course suggested by the secretary-general on April 29. With the difficulties that the U.N. was experiencing in organizing UNAMIR II, it would have been difficult for the Security Council to refuse the request. When the French authorities decided to move, they wanted immediate action, probably because they feared the Rwandan government forces were so close to defeat. They were ready to send troops without a resolution and on the basis of"less formal cover," if the secretary-general agreed.138 The French government did not even wait for the Security Council decision and landed its troops in Goma, which was to serve as the rear-base of the operation, hours before the council, with five abstentions, voted the mandate for Operation Turquoise.139

As planned, one detachment of troops entered Rwanda in the southwest and went directly to Nyarushishi. They were accompanied by the expected entourage of journalists who published the desired favorable reports about the rescue operation. Col. Didier Thibault was in command. According to Prunier, Thibault was a false name being used by Col. Didier Tauzin, who had previously served as an adviser to the Rwandan army. The investigative commission identified Tauzin as head of the French operation that had helped the Rwandan forces "spectacularly save the situation" in turning back the RPF offensive in February 1993.140 With much fanfare, Colonel Thibault and his men ordered militia to dismantle their barriers. One French officer confiscated a grenade from a militia member and gave him a reproving lecture before the journalists.141

At the very same time, and with virtually no attention from the foreign press, another detachment of 200 elite troops crossed into northwestern Rwanda at Gisenyi and began carrying out reconnaisance in the region.142 Their arrival in Gisenyi was hailed gleefully by announcers on RTLM and Radio Rwanda.143 Perhaps the only foreign reporter to cover the story wrote that French troops in the northwest were "discreet." Unlike their fellows to the south, they did not interferewith the militia at the barriers. Within the next day or two, they brought important quantities of equipment and supplies from Goma and set up camps in Gisenyi, ready to protect the town that housed the genocidal government.144 The troops then moved east some fifteen miles to Mukamira, a military camp where the French had once trained Rwandan soldiers. There they were near Bigogwe, where Barril was supposedly carrying on a training program and well positioned to advance the twelve or so miles to the town of Ruhengeri, which was then besieged by the RPF. On June 24, Colonel Thibault said that the French were considering moving on to Ruhengeri.145

In a briefing in Paris on June 23 military spokesmen said that a small detachment had crossed the border to Gisenyi and that a larger force would arrive there subsequently. When questioned in Paris about the deployment two days later, however, Gen. Raymond Germanos, deputy chief of staff of the army, reportedly declared that a first contingent of thirty had crossed into northwestern Rwanda only at noon that day, June 25. It seems unlikely that General Germanos, identified as the officer in charge of the operation, did not know of the earlier deployment.146 Perhaps he was simply distinguishing between information relating to humanitarian concerns and that dealing with "military secrets," a practice recommended in a confidential, official document about Operation Turquoise.147 The inaccurate information delivered by General Germanos and the absence of discussion about the deployment in the northwest at the time and

since—including in the report of the investigative commission—suggest that it was part of the "military secrets" of Operation Turquoise.148

The French commanders ordered their troops to encourage local civilian and military officials to "reestablish their authority," persisting in their view that the genocide resulted from governmental failure rather than governmental success.149 The French soldiers followed orders. Even in regions where they dismantled barriers and chased away militia, they took no action against local authorities. They worked every day with Prefects Kayishema and Bagambiki and many of their subordinates, even though well aware of the evidence against them. Colonel Thibault described the Rwandan government and army as "legal organisations," meanwhile admitting that some of their officials "might have blood on their hands."150 He declared that he had no mandate to replace these people and that "the legitimacy of this government is not my problem."151 Thibault's opinions reflected those held at the highest levels of the French government. When questioned at the Presidency in early July, Bruno Delaye, the African adviser to Mitterrand, defended French collaboration with local authorities. He said that France had no choice but to continue relying on them because it lacked the personnel to replace them.152

Rwandan authorities at first believed that Operation Turquoise was the rescue mission promised by Huchon and they immediately became more assertive towards the RPF and towards UNAMIR.153 Once French troops landed in Gisenyi and moved towards Ruhengeri, General Bizimungu—convinced a week before that the war was lost—declared that his forces would soon be launching an offensive against the RPF.154 Ordinary people too anticipated French support and welcomed the troops with cheers, flowers, and banners. At one barrier a member of the Interahamwe "sporting a straw hat painted to resemble the tricolour, posed for thecamera with his weapons—bows and arrows, a spear, and a machete—in front of a sign that read, "Vive La France."155 The prefect of Gikongoro assured a warm welcome by having residents of the prefectural center gather to rehearse their "spontaneous" cheers and in Gisenyi authorities deployed entire schools of children to wave little French flags.156

As the dismantling of barriers in Cyangugu became known, some militia and government officials expressed anger and disappointment at the French. RTLM announcer Valerie Bemeriki sought to prevent any further erosion in relations between the interim government and the foreign troops. She urged listeners to make special efforts to seek out the French soldiers, to sing and dance for them, drink with them, invite them for dinner, and serve as guides when they went out in their cars. All these occasions should be used, she advised, to explain to them the "problem of Hutu and Tutsi" and the "wickedness of the Inyenzi and their supporters."157 Announcer Gaspard Gahigi harangued the French about not interfering with roadblocks and directed officials to prepare people at the barriers with appropriate responses should the French ask what they were doing.158

Several days after arriving in Cyangugu, Colonel Thibault and some of his troops moved further east to establish a base at the town of Gikongoro. There they took no action against militia and did not react to civilians carrying grenades. Asked why, Thibault reportedly answered that "the French army has no authority to disarm the militia or dismantle the road-blocks even though they are a threat to civilian lives."159 French soldiers did confiscate a limited number of weapons from militia on an "empirical" basis according to a later statement by Colonel Thibaut. They reportedly collected about one hundred firearms Gikongoro and another one hundred in Kibuye. In some regions, the French soldiers permitted civilians to retain their arms if the local administrators indicated this was necessary "to assureusual police missions."160 It is unclear why the French soldiers were ready to dismantle barriers and collect grenades in Cyangugu and not in Gisenyi or Gikongoro. Perhaps after having established the "humanitarian" nature of the operation in the first few days, they believed that it was no longer necessary to impress journalists. Perhaps as criticism by interim authorities grew, they wished to minimize any cause

of conflict with them.161 Or perhaps, as an official telegram reported in early July, they feared "provoking a general reaction" against their troops by militia or government forces.162 In Paris as well as in the region, high-ranking officers expressed this concern just as others in New York and elsewhere had previously voiced anxiety over the risk of injury to UNAMIR soldiers.163

The readiness of French soldiers to be swayed by local authorities accounts in part for their slowness in rescuing Tutsi at Bisesero, an incident that came to symbolize French indifference to the genocide. On June 26, journalist Sam Kiley informed French soldiers that Tutsi were being attacked nightly at Bisesero, the site of long-standing resistance described above. He showed them on a map exactly where the Tutsi were located, only a few miles distant from a French camp.164 The commanding officer, Capt. Marin Gillier, sent a small patrol in that direction the next day. According to Tutsi survivors, they spoke with these soldiers who promised to return in three days. The Tutsi relate that the soldiers were accompanied by local authorities and that by having come out to speak with the French, they exposed themselves to an attack soon after that killed many of theirnumber.165 According to Gillier's account, the patrol found no Tutsi but were told by local authorities that RPF infiltrators had penetrated the region and were threatening them.166 French soldiers had observed weapons fire on at least one occasion at Bisesero and Gillier knew, as he told reporters, that people were being killed every night. But he remarked that he did not want to "get involved in politics" and declined to say who were the victims and who the killers.167

Gillier requested permission on June 27 and again on June 28 to investigate the situation in Bisesero. He received no response and hesitated to move on his own authority, he later explained, because his forces—according to the press nearly seventy elite French troops—might be put at risk.168 The general staff of the operation, presumably referring to information Gillier had received from local authorities, told journalists that as many as one to two thousand well-armed RPF soldiers might have penetrated the government lines and infiltrated to the banks of Lake Kivu.169 Remarkably enough, elite reconnaisance troops, equipped with such equipment as night-vision goggles, had found no evidence of infiltration and the commanding officers of the operation, with numerous sophisticated helicopters and airplanes at their disposition, apparently ordered no aerial reconnaissance to discover whether any RPF troops were actually in the area.

On June 29, Defense Minister François Léotard came to the French post near Bisesero on an inspection visit. Gillier briefed him on the situation, including the possibility that there were Tutsi needing rescue in the area. According to *New York Times* correspondent Raymond Bonner, who interviewed soldiers on the spot, Léotard "rejected any operation to evacuate or protect the embattled Tutsi at Bisesero," saying that the French did not have enough troops to protect everyone. A French journalist, however, reported that as Léotard was leaving, he turned backunder the persistent questioning of the *New York Times* correspondent and ordered that troops be sent the next day. This account does not indicate where the soldiers were to be sent. Gillier later reported that their objective was to offer evacuation to a French priest at a church beyond Bisesero. He described locating the endangered Tutsi as an accident, the result of a chance sighting by some of his soldiers. Once he and most of his troops arrived at the church on June 30, he received a radio message from another part of the group who had turned back after having seen "some people different from those we had encountered since our arrival." They had discovered the Tutsi and called for urgent help.170

When Gillier and the rest of his force reached the site, they had no trouble seeing who were the killers and who the victims. A band of armed assailants had gathered on a nearby hill as the ragged, starving and wounded Tutsi survivors emerged from the bushes and caves. Confronted finally with the reality of the genocide, these French troops provided protection, food and medical help to the Tutsi survivors. Some 300 of the 800 who straggled out of the bush needed medical attention, about one hundred of them urgently so.171

The next morning, the soldiers walked through Bisesero valley, which had been inaccessible to their vehicles, and discovered hundreds of bodies, many of persons recently slain. It was, Gillier reported, "intolerable."172 He urged a television cameraman to film the corpses, saying "People must see this."173 The soldiers discovered no weapons or other evidence that the Tutsi were RPF infiltrators, leading Sgt. Maj. Thierry Prungnaud to complain, "We were manipulated. We thought the Hutu were the good guys and the victims."174 Someof the soldiers who had been pleased at first by the warm welcome from militia now rejected their professions of friendship. As one said, "I've had enough of being cheered by murderers."175 One French officer who had instructed soldiers of the Presidential Guard broke down and cried so moved was he at the crimes that might have been committed by men whom he had trained.176 The commander of Operation Turquoise, General Lafourcade, declared that Rwandan officials had engaged in a deception to keep the French from intervening at Bisesero.177

Recognizing the crimes and deceptions of the genocidal authorities, however, did not make French military officers any more conciliatory towards the RPF. Seeing the government defense of Kigali crumbling before a persistent RPF attack, military experts in Paris predicted a "catastrophe" if the RPF were to win a "total victory."178 On June 30, General Germanos ordered French soldiers in the north to maintain their forward position at Mukamira, some ten or twelve miles from the front at Ruhengeri, and directed those in the south to make forays as necessary to evacuate persons at risk in Butare.179 A small French plane and a helicopter went to Butare on July 1 and returned the next day with some clergy, including the Bishop of Butare, and some faculty from the university.180 During a second mission on July 3, described above, the French troops were fired on by the RPF. The next day, at noon, French troops at Gikongoro were ordered to hold the line against any RPF advance. They dug in, some of them at least seeming to anticipate combat with some relish. Colonel Thibault reportedly declared that if the RPF challengedthe "line in the sand" drawn by the French, "we will open fire against them without any hesitation...and we have the means."181

Rwandan authorities at both local and national levels did their best to incite the French to open conflict with the RPF. Callixte Kalimanzira of the Interior Ministry asked the interim government to appeal urgently to the French to "protect the innocent people threatened by the Inkotanyi" in Butare prefecture.182 The prefect of Cyangugu insisted that the French must "go into the RPF area and free our civilian population taken as hostages by the rebels," a desire expressed also by the prefects of Butare and Ruhengeri.183 Foreign Minister Bicamumpaka appealed to France to order its troops to stop the RPF advance and to intervene between the two sides.184 The head of the Interahamwe, Robert Kajuga, assured a journalist that he was not concerned about the approaching RPF troops. "France is a great power, like America or England. They can stop the war."185 Radio Rwanda and RTLM alternately pleaded with the French to come to Kigali and promised that they were sure to do so.186

On July 6, the French and the RPF decided not to make war.187 Several days earlier, the French government announced that its forces would stay in Rwanda only if the Security Council authorized the creation of a "secure humanitarian zone" to "ensure that the people are safe from any threat from any side," accordingto Juppé.188 The Security Council never authorized or approved the zone, but did acknowledge what amounted to a unilateral extension of the French mandate. The zone encompassed the southwestern quadrant of the country but did not include any of the northwest, nor did it reach to Kigali. French withdrawal from Gisenyi took place unheralded, presumably on or about July 5, and left the interim government and its troops without foreign protection in the northwest. French authorities thus signaled their readiness to stand aside for an RPF advance almost certain to result in the "total victory" that they had deplored just days before. In all likelihood, the withdrawal and the acceptance that it symbolized constituted part of an unpublicized agreement which ended the confrontation with the RPF.

Obviously distressed at the change in French policy, the interim authorities began to realize that the best they could hope for was passive protection rather than a more aggressive defense.189 Ferdinand Nahimana, counselor at the Presidency, at first criticized the French bitterly for establishing an "Indian reservation," and then tried to persuade them to extend the zone at least to cover all the territory still more or less controlled by the Rwandan army.190 Interim Prime Minister Kambanda and Interim President Sindikubwabo each made the same request formally to their French counterparts several days later, Sindikubwabo stressing the need to save nearly four million people threatened by massacres by the RPF.191

Once the French backed off from combat with the RPF, the French representative at Goma, Yannick Gérard, deputy director of African and Malagasay Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, advocated severing links clearly and publicly with the interim government. He pointed out that Washington was preparing to do so and advised Paris:

Their collective responsibility in calls to murder over Radio Mille Collines during these months seems to me well established. Members of this government cannot in any case, be considered valid interlocutors for a politicalsettlement. Their usefulness lay in facilitating the good operation of Operation Turquoise. Now they will only try to complicate our task.192

Gérard wrote the next day that further contact with the "discredited authorities" would be "useless and even harmful." He concluded, "We have nothing more to say to them, except to get lost as fast as possible."193

Administrative officials, members of militia and Rwandan army soldiers flooded into the secure zone along with ordinary civilians who feared the RPF advance. At this time, both officials and RTLM were ordering people to flee and warning that the RPF would surely kill them if they did not. The French joined in such warnings, telling people in Butare to flee west to Gikongoro and later warning people in Cyangugu to seek refuge across the border in Zaire.194 On July 11, the commanding officer of Operation Turquoise reportedly stated that officials of the interim government could seek asylum in the zone if the RPF took Gisenyi.195 Three days later, the Foreign Ministry in Paris countermanded the invitation and asked its local representative to inform Rwandan authorities that they were not welcome.196 General Lafourcade informed Gérard on July 15, however, that several important figures of the interim government—they turned out to be the interim prime minister and interim president—were in Cyangugu and reconstituting their government. The ambassador immediately notified Paris:

Since we consider their presence undesirable in the secure humanitarian zone and knowing as we do that the authorities bear a heavy responsibility for the genocide, we have no other choice, whatever the difficulties, but arrestingthem or putting them immediately under house arrest until a competent international judicial authority decides their case.197

The question of arrests involved also the numerous local authorities with whom the French had been collaborating, including the prefects of Kibuye and Cyangugu. As of July 10, French officers had compiled detailed information about their responsibilities in the genocide, which they had presumably communicated promptly to Paris.198

Gérard's insistence that the interim authorities be arrested seemed to accord with the position taken by Foreign Minister Juppé three weeks before when he wrote that "France will make no accomodation with the killers and their commanders...[and] demands that those responsible for these genocides be judged."199 At the Presidency, however, Bruno Delaye insisted that arresting those accused of genocide did not fall within the French mandate. On July 16, the Foreign Ministry bowed to this view. In an uncanny echo of the pretexts used to explain U.N. failure to act, it declared that "our mandate does not authorize us to arrest them on our own authority. Such a task could undermine our neutrality, the best guarantee of our effectiveness."200 The French government could have requested that the mandate be changed or could have unilaterally redefined the mandate, as it had in effect done by creating the secure humanitarian zone. Instead the French government, like the U.N., hid behind the cover of legal

technicalities. After all the important authorities had left the zone, the French arrested a small number of persons who had not held government posts. In one case, they arrested nine persons accused of genocide, but failed to transfer them, as had been promised, to U.N. custody.201
When the French government declared that it would not arrest genocidal leaders, it was criticized at the U.N. and elsewhere for protecting persons guilty ofgenocide.202 To end these criticisms and to avoid embarassment should the newly established Kigali government ask for these persons to be handed over to them, French authorities wanted them to leave the zone quickly. General Lafourcade maintains that once the Rwandan authorities understood that they were unwelcome, they left the zone on their own initiative and without French assistance.203
A French military journal reported in October 1994, however, that the tactical general staff "initiated and organized" the evacuation of the transitional government to Zaire on July 17.204
The report of the investigative commission confirms that French troops evacuated former prime minister Dismas Nsengiyaremye, who was to be part of the transitional government, from Cyangugu by air on July 17.205 No charges had been made against Nsengiyaremye, but others who were supposed to serve in the transitional government were at the time serving as ministers in the interim government and were apparently implicated in the genocide: Minister of Defense Augustin Bizimana, Minister of Family and Women's Affairs Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, Minister of Planning André Ntagerura, and Minister of Commerce Justin Mugenzi. Ferdinand Nahimana, who was to serve as minister of higher education in the transitional government, had directed activities at RTLM and was an adviser to the presidency. Official French sources have not indicated if any of these five were part of the transitional government members who benefited from French assistance in leaving Rwanda on or about July 17.
After local officials most implicated in the genocide fled into exile, French soldiers kept the administration functioning through their own efforts and those of Rwandans whom they selected on the spot.206 Presumably they could have achieved the same results several weeks before at a time when Delaye and others had asserted it was impossible for the French to replace local officials.
When French authorities decided to sever ties with the interim government, they continued to hope that some military officers could serve as valid representatives of the "Hutu" force that they wished to support. In a telegram of July 7, Gérard commented on the continuing authority of General Bizimungu. Expressing a wish that sounds almost like a directive, he wrote:
...it would be very desirable for the chief of staff of the FAR to dissociate himself very quickly politically from the Gisenyi authorities in order to strengthen his position as an interlocutor and negotiator.207
Bizimungu did not disavow the genocide, but other officers did, as discussed below. French soldiers evacuated at least some of those officers, perhaps hoping one of them would take the leadership role they had wanted Bizimungu to play.208 Journalist Sam Kiley charged that French soldiers who arrived in Butare on July 1 also evacuated Colonel Bagosora, flying him out on July 2 along with a small number of other persons. Kiley's source was a high-ranking French officer who knew Bagosora well and who had reason to be well-informed about the details of the operation.209 If the French did indeed provide this service for Bagosora, it was a mark of surprising consideration for a man who was characterized as "filth" by a French officer who dealt with him regularly.210
The French authorities permitted Rwandan soldiers to remain in and to transit through the secure zone without hindrance. In most circumstances they did not disarm them and in some cases, they assisted them on their way. One foreign soldier witnessed French soldiers refueling Rwandan army trucks before they departed for Zaire with their loads of goods looted from local homes and businesses. In Zaire, French soldiers drove their Rwandan colleagues around in official vehicles and, according to the report of the investigative commission,French soldiers delivered ten tons of food to Rwandan troops at Goma on July 21, 1994.211

In the first days of the operation, the French authorities showed little interest in blocking RTLM or Radio Rwanda, but once those stations began propaganda hostile to the French forces, France announced at the U.N. that it would do everything possible to silence them. French officers made contact with the broadcasters of Radio Rwanda, who were operating in the secure humanitarian zone, and quickly obliged them to change the tone of their comments. When Bruno Delaye was asked to end broadcasts of RTLM, he said that the mandate did not cover such an operation and that, in any case, French forces had been unable to find its transmitters. But within days of beginning work on the problem, French agents were also able to locate some of the relay stations used by RTLM and to destroy them.212

Once the staunchest supporter of the interim government, France finally provided the resources that saved a substantial number of its intended victims. As the RPF advanced in June, killers hurried to finish their "work." The RPF managed to save thousands as it moved forward, but could not have reached the southwest and west quickly enough to save the groups of Tutsi already exhausted by months of attack, hunger and flight, who were hidden on mountain tops or in river valleys. The thousands who were confined at Nyarushishi were safe only because the local National Police commander, Lieutenant Colonel Bavugamenshi, insisted on protecting them. Had he been removed, they too would have faced attack and possible extermination before the RPF could have reached them.213 To all those people, the French soldiers who came to their rescue were saviors, regardless of what had moved officials in Paris to send them to Rwanda.

According to French estimates, their 2,500 elite soldiers, equipped with the best equipment available, saved some 8,000 to 10,000 people at Nyarushishi, another 1,100 at Bisesero and another 6,000 in Gikongoro, a total of approximately15,000 to 17,000 people.214 UNAMIR, with its barely 500 men, poorly armed and equipped, protected at one time nearly twice that number. Like members of the U.N., the French could and did save lives when it suited their interests. And, when it did not, they too hid behind excuses of insufficient troops and concerns for their safety or they used a supposed commitment to adhering to the mandate or to preserving neutrality as pretexts for inaction.

[Footnotes]

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