

French compromised by collaboration in Rwanda

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The Guardian, July 1, 1994, page 26

FRENCH army commanders in Rwanda are working closely with officials implicated in the murder and persecution of Tutsis. In some cases, the French are relying on officials who helped organise the slaughter to enforce measures to end it.

Francois Leotard, the French defence minister, on Wednesday visited troops protecting refugees to allay fears that Paris, while claiming purely humanitarian motives, intends to prop up the Rwandan government.

French collaboration with the killers continues to raise fears of ulterior motives and will not reassure those in need of protection from the authorities, the stated aim of the French intervention.

In the Cyangugu area of south-west Rwanda, road-blocks set up by pro-government militia to capture Tutsis often remain in place after French troops have moved into the area.

The French commander in Cyangungu, Colonel Didier Thibaut, is relying on the local prefect to clear the barricades. He said the French army has no authority to disarm the militia or dismantle the road-blocks even though they are a threat to civilian lives.

Col Thibaut has built a close working relationship with the prefect, Mgambiki Emanuel. But some of the 8,000 Tutsis who were held at Cyangungu stadium – supposedly for their own protection – said Mr Mgambiki participated in the selection of individuals who were handed to the militia and murdered.

Among those executed was the father of 19-year-old Pierre Canisuius. The two Tutsi men had taken refuge in the cathedral having eluded militiamen tracking them with dogs. Several days later, Mr Mgambiki ordered the Tutsis in the crowded building to move to the stadium.

“The prefect and the soldiers came to the stadium and said : ‘there are people among you who are in contact with the rebels. The militia want to kill them and they must leave for the good of the security of the other people here’. They had a list of 15 people who were taken away. The next day they were dead. One of them was my father,” Pierre Canisuius said.

Although Mr Mgambiki is directly linked to the killings, Col Thibaut said it is no obstacle to his working with him.

“We are not in a war against the Rwandan government or the Rwandan armed forces,” he said. “They are legal organisations. Some members might have blood on their hands, but not all. It is not my task and not my mandate to replace these people.”

He agreed that there might be some risk of compromising the description of the mission as purely humanitarian if French forces were working with, and therefore seeming to protect, those guilty of crimes against humanity. But he said these were political questions which should be resolved by governments.

The refugees have been moved from the stadium to a nearby camp at Nyarushishi where they are “protected” by armed gendarmes who guarded them at the stadium. Although French soldiers are on hand, the Tutsis in the camp said they live in fear. Aid workers have also criticised the use of the gendarmes.

While the French continue to insist on humanitarian motives, there is a perceptible slant to their interpretation of the crisis.

Col Thibaut played down atrocities against Tutsis by highlighting the suffering of the majority Hutu population. He said there were hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees in his area who had fled the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) rebel advance. This week

another 250,000 Hutus were found living in a forest.

He said there were not nearly as many Tutsis displaced, but omitted that most of the Tutsis who tried to flee were dead or still in hiding.

Col Thibaut argued that the Tutsis in Nyarushishi camp are also afraid of a rebel advance, implying that they fear the RPF will kill them. But the Tutsi refugees said they fear new rebel successes because they might provoke the militia into a final killing spree.

In an effort to establish legitimacy for the intervention, French forces are trying to recruit aid organisations to the cause. Most have refused, afraid that association will damage their credibility in rebel areas, or if the mood turns against the French.

Some foreign aid workers are also concerned at the size of the military force. France has brought in at least four Jaguar fighter jets, which might be thought unusual for confronting the machetes of the death squads.