

# French lead flight from Rwanda

Mark Huband

The Guardian, April 11, 1994

HEAVY fighting raged in the Rwandan capital last night as government troops fought rebels to the west of the city and French paratroopers escorted the first foreign nationals out of the main airport.

Bursts of mortar, rocket and machine-gun fire stopped scores of United Nations employees from reaching the airport to be evacuated on the first UN plane to reach the city.

French troops who arrived in the capital yesterday escorted 68 foreigners onto a waiting French air force aircraft, which took off amid heavy shooting less than a mile from the runway, despite reports of a ceasefire being agreed.

Four Belgian Hercules C-130s arrived at the airport yesterday afternoon carrying 200 troops, who plan to escort other foreigners out of the country. Belgium had initially been refused permission to land at the airport, following accusations by the Rwandan military that Belgium supported the Rwandan Patriotic Front rebels now fighting government troops on the outskirts of the capital.

Burning houses sent palls of smoke across the lush hillsides around the city as the fighting intensified.

The 13 staff of the French relief agency Medecins Sans Frontieres were pulled out, leaving hundreds of people wounded in tribal fighting without any

medical care.

"Yesterday we were treating 100 people at Kigali hospital," said Christophe Fenasse, MSF administrator. "Most of them had been injured with machetes and knives and were living in tents at the hospital. This morning all of them were slaughtered when other people came with machetes to the hospital."

Staff from a Catholic orphanage at Masaka, seven miles west of Kigali were slaughtered by teenagers brandishing knives and machetes at midday yesterday, nuns from the centre said before they fled out with 97 orphans last night on Belgian aircraft.

"There were a group of 50 youngsters, all Hutus that we knew, who came to the orphanage at around 12.30," said Sister Rafaela, a Polish nun who has worked at the centre for 18 years. "They started to steal all the money we had. We gave them everything to quieten them down. But then they started killing the nurses and the other staff with their knives and pistols. They even had hand grenades."

"They threw all the people they had attacked into a pit for the toilet. Some were still alive, and they were thrown into the pit. The ones who were unconscious we had to leave."

Members of the presidential guard, which has been held responsible for

leading much of the tribal slaughter since the death in a plane crash of Rwanda's president Juvenal Habyarimana last week, were yesterday in nominal control of the airport. However 350 French paratroopers who arrived from the Central African Republic yesterday afternoon patrolled the airport perimeter while Rwandan forces looked on.

"The government controls the town, the presidential guard controls the airport and the RPF controls the west and north," said Butch Waldrum, transport adviser to the UN's 2,500 peacekeepers, who has been attempting to evacuate UN employees, "but the airport is really under French control, through their relationship with the presidential guard."

"The town is a disaster. I have been trying to take people out for three days, and we have had a couple of guys killed in the process. The worst thing seems to be the banditry. It's random, and the bandits have a system where

they blow you away if you're in a civilian car," he said.

The Foreign Office issued advice via the BBC World Service and the British High Commission in Kampala, Uganda, for them to find French or Belgian troops to escort them to Kigali airport or to join convoys heading for Burundi or Tanzania.

French evacuees leaving aboard military aircraft from Kigali airport last night had remained shut inside their houses since last Thursday, when President Habyarimana's death led to an orgy of killing by his Hutu tribesmen who accused the RPF rebels of bringing down his plane.

"There were events that I have never seen in my life," said one Frenchman resident in the country for two months. "I heard my Rwandan neighbours being killed. They did not threaten us. But we can't stay. There were riots, then a small civil war, and now there's a war with the RPF."