Rebel demand delays signing of joint communique

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DAR ES SALAAM, March 6 (AFP) - A last minute demand by the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) that France immediately withdraw its troops from the central African country Saturday delayed the conclusion of a meeting aimed at reviving the Rwandan peace process.

Officials at the Tanzanian-mediated discussions between the RPF and Rwandan government representatives said the rebels demanded the French troops pull out of Rwanda immediately and a deadline for the withdrawal be included in a draft joint communique that was scheduled to be issued Saturday.

Both parties spent Friday night in tough negotiations.

Diplomatic sources however said the two sides had agreed that political negotiations in the northern Tanzania town of Arusha would resume by mid-March.

The negotiations to discuss the integration of RPF forces into the national army and repatriation and resettlement of Rwandan refugees were slated to end by the end of this month paving the way for a signing of a peace accord.

Diplomats have criticised the RPF's last minute demand saying it would inordinately prolong the meeting which was aimed at seeking firm guarantees from both sides on respecting the ceasefire and other protocols agreed on earlier during the Arusha talks.

"The RPF demand is unnecessary at this particular time ... the question of French troops in Rwanda could be tackled at a later stage," said Senegalese ambassador to Kenya, Papa Louis Fall, who is representing the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) chairman, President Abdou Diouf.

There are nearly 700 French soldiers in Rwanda officially to protect more than 400 French residents and

other foreigners in Rwanda.

The RPF has accused the French troops of fighting alongside government forces, but France and the Rwandan government have denied the allegation.

Tanzanian foreign ministry officials at the meeting said the joint communique was now expected to be signed later Saturday.

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