

Rwandan Rebels Vow To Honour 'safe Zone'

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From Sam Kiley in Gikongoro.

FRANCE and the Rwandan Patriotic Front agreed yesterday that French troops can police a "refugee zone" in the country's southwest. At the same time the RPF declared itself the legitimate government of Rwanda.

In claiming legitimacy, the Tutsi-dominated RPF promised that the new government would be headed by a Hutu Prime Minister. Its spokesman at the United Nations in New York said he was expected to be Faustin Twagiramungu, who narrowly escaped assassination by Hutu death squads. He was to become the Prime Minister of a coalition transitional government under last year's Arusha peace accord, but could not take office because of hardline Hutu opposition.

The RPF government is certain to be quickly backed by Paris, whose forces earlier this week came very close to having to stop its troops with force. Other Western powers may delay recognition for some time.

What remains of the National Revolutionary Democratic Movement government, whose army has been destroyed by the rebels, is to be found in the Meridien Hotel in Gisenyi, near the border with Zaire, to which they are expected soon to flee.

Paris has now abandoned any attempt to back the vanquished Hutu

regime, whose troops it had armed and trained since the rebels first invaded from Uganda in 1990. The French government will be able to maintain both its powerful influence over the new RPF government and its position as the pre-eminent foreign power in central Africa.

Part of the deal to allow a safe zone, French military sources said in Gikongoro yesterday, was that the RPF would cease its advance in the area. At the same time, the sources said, the French would quietly withdraw from the north, where the government-held town of Ruhengeri has been surrounded by the RPF.

The French mission to Rwanda will now concentrate on stemming the destabilising flood of refugees from the fighting into neighbouring states, which are themselves on the verge of collapse. Of particular concern are Burundi, the scene of tribal massacres in which 100,000 people died last year, and Zaire, where central government has collapsed. At least 1.5m Rwandans are already living in camps in Tanzania, Zaire and Burundi. The rebel advance in the southwest would have driven more than a million more across the borders. The rebels yesterday stopped their advance on Gikongoro about five miles from the town centre, which has been ringed with French

troops. News that the rebels would come no closer immediately eased tension.

France's next task under its deal with the RPF will be to disarm the fallen government's militiamen, who have been responsible for much of the genocide in Rwanda. The RPF has insisted that only regular army troops may carry weapons in the former government's territory, and behind the

French cordon sanitaire. The French began to honour this undertaking yesterday by arresting several hundred members of the notorious interahamwe those who kill together.

"We expect to stay here in a policing role until the United Nations can replace us. This is an excellent outcome to what looked like a nasty situation earlier in the week," a senior French officer said yesterday.