

French Troops to Intervene in the Congo

U.N. Leader Asked Chirac to Intervene in Ethnic Power Struggle

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UNITED NATIONS, May 28 -- France said today it would begin deploying a French-led multinational force in the Democratic Republic of the Congo next week to halt a surge in ethnic violence that has left at least hundreds dead and driven tens of thousands from their homes.

The French commitment to lead a force of more than 1,000 international troops came weeks after U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan appealed to French President Jacques Chirac to intervene in the Ituri province of Congo to stop a bloody power struggle between the ethnic Hemma and Lendu militia. It coincided with a report by a senior U.N. humanitarian official who described scenes of atrocities and mounting chaos during a recent visit to Bunia, the capital of Ituri.

"The situation in Ituri is critical," France's U.N. ambassador, Jean Marc de La Sabliere, told reporters after briefing the 15-nation Security Council on his government's plans. "We have been asked to lead a multinational force in Ituri, and France has accepted to lead such a force."

The French envoy said he expected the council to adopt as early as Friday a resolution authorizing France to "take all necessary means" -- including use of force -- to restore stability in Bunia, ensure the protection of the town's main airport and refugee camps and, if necessary, defend the city's population. South Africa, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands and Britain have said they may be prepared to provide troops or support for the operation, according to senior U.S. and French officials.

The deployment of French troops in Congo would mark the second time in the past year that France has sent troops to Africa to quell a conflict. France already has 4,000 troops in Ivory Coast.

De La Sabliere said the French force would remain in Congo only until Sept. 1. It would be replaced by 1,200 U.N. peacekeepers from Bangladesh who are scheduled to arrive in Bunia in mid-August.

The arrangement represents a significant escalation of the United Nations' role in Congo. The United Nations had authorized a force of more than 8,700 peacekeepers in Congo to help implement an internationally brokered cease-fire and to monitor the withdrawal of several African countries. However, only 5,300 U.N. troops have arrived.

The withdrawal on May 7 of one of those countries, Uganda, sparked the latest struggle for control of Ituri's natural resources.

Carolyn McAskie, the U.N. deputy emergency relief coordinator, said Bunia has been transformed into a "ghost town" as more than 80 percent of the population fled in recent weeks, including 20,000 civilians who have crowded into the U.N. compound at the airport.

McAskie, who recently returned from Bunia, said the United Nations has no reliable casualty figures there.

But she said that 300 to 500 people have been killed in the last 10 days. There was evidence of mutilation, rape and "villagers going after each other with machetes," she said.

The crisis in Congo has provided an opportunity for the United States and France, which differed bitterly over the war in Iraq, to work together.

Richard S. Williamson, the U.S. representative to the United Nations for political affairs, said the Bush administration helped obtain written assurances from Uganda and Rwanda, which previously opposed French intervention, to support France's action. But U.S. officials made it clear that U.S. troops would not participate in peacekeeping in Congo.

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