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Rwanda Cuts Ties With France Over Effort to Prosecute Leader

By Arthur Asiiimwe

KIGALI, Rwanda — Rwanda broke off diplomatic ties with France on Friday in protest of a French judge's call for President Paul Kagame to stand trial in the 1994 killing of one of his predecessors, the event that unleashed the country's genocide.

Rwanda's foreign minister, Charles Murigande, said the government had given France's ambassador 24 hours to leave the country and told other French diplomats to go within 72 hours. Rwanda had earlier recalled its ambassador from Paris.

A Rwandan statement issued Friday morning accused France of trying to topple the government.

French officials had no immediate comment on the break. A Foreign Ministry spokesman said earlier that France's ambassador would remain in Kigali, the capital, "to keep open channels for dialogue."

Thousands of Rwandans protested in the capital Thursday after anti-terrorism judge Jean-Louis Bruguiere issued arrest warrants for nine Kagame associates in the 1994 downing of a plane carrying President Juvenal Habyarimana.

Kagame has immunity under French law, but Bruguiere urged the U.N. tribunal that is hearing cases about Rwanda's genocide to try him. French Foreign Ministry spokesman Jean-Baptiste Mattei said that the judge "has filed international arrest warrants, but he did this on his own authority and in total independence."

Bruguiere's investigation followed a complaint by the families of the French crew flying Habyarimana's plane and the leader's widow, Agathe.

The accusations have infuriated the Kagame government, which calls them a coverup for France's alleged role in training soldiers who carried out the genocide. On Friday, his government depicted the allegations as a new part of a campaign against Rwanda.

For the past 12 years, France has waged "both overt and covert war against the government of Rwanda hoping to overthrow it and reinstate to power allies and perpetrators of the genocide," a Rwandan Foreign Ministry statement said.

Rwanda was a Belgian colony until independence in 1962. France maintained close links with the French-speaking country from 1975 to 1994, providing financial and military support to Habyarimana's government.

Rwanda launched an investigation last month into France's alleged role in the genocide. It accused France of backing Habyarimana's government and training soldiers it knew were plotting to commit the massacres. Officials in Paris deny the allegations.

Bruguiere said there was evidence that Kagame and his military staff devised the operation to shoot down Habyarimana's plane, which was hit by a suspected missile in 1994.

The crash, which extremists of the majority Hutu tribe blamed on rival Tutsis, was used to fan the flames of ethnic hatred and launch a slaughter of 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus over 100 days. Habyarimana was a Hutu.

Kagame is revered by many genocide survivors because his rebel army, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, defeated the Hutu extremists in a march across the country to Kigali.

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