

May 29, 2003

French Proposal for U.N. Force to Halt Congo Strife Gets Support

By FELICITY BARRINGER

UNITED NATIONS, May 28 — Mindful of continuing bloodshed that has killed or maimed hundreds of civilians in northeastern Congo, members of the United Nations Security Council rallied today around a French proposal to send a multinational force to the city of Bunia to prevent further massacres.

The resolution is expected to come to a vote by the end of the week, and the advance guard of the force should arrive in Bunia next week to begin repairing the airport runway. This would allow larger aircraft to transport the troops, and also medical supplies and other aid to the city's population. Many local people took shelter either at the United Nations compound in town or at the airport, diplomats and United Nations officials said.

The force of about 1,200 troops, whose mandate runs until Sept. 1, will be led by the French and will include a substantial contingent of South African troops.

Dumisani Kumalo, the South African envoy here, said, "We think it's very, very important that Africa also participates in this process."

Britain, Belgium and the Netherlands are likely to support the deployment, though it was not clear how many troops, if any, they would supply, their diplomats said. Belgian diplomats said their country would send only noncombat forces. Nigeria, Pakistan and Norway may also take part.

The new force would have a broader mandate than about 700 lightly armed Uruguayan peacekeepers now in Bunia. The Uruguayans could not intervene in the inter-ethnic warfare that ignited when troops from neighboring Uganda pulled out of Ituri Province a few weeks ago.

Neighboring countries have widely different attitudes toward foreign intervention. The Rwandan government in Kigali, for instance, which is dominated by Tutsi, deeply distrusts the French, seeing them as supporters of the Hutu government that ran the country when 800,000 people, many of them Tutsi, were massacred in 1994.

Today the head of United Nations peacekeeping operations, Jean-Marie Guehenno, met with President Paul Kagame of Rwanda in Kigali. Afterward, he told The Associated Press, "I was very pleased and encouraged to see that the president sees the usefulness of such a force."

In a press briefing earlier today, Carolyn McAskie, the United Nations emergency relief coordinator, painted a grim picture of conditions in Ituri Province, including widespread rape and looting.

"Bunia is like a ghost town, down to 10 to 15 percent of its population" of about 250,000, she said.