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France Says It Will Send Troops to Congo Under U.N. Mandate

By FELICITY BARRINGER

UNITED NATIONS, May 13 — As tens of thousands of troops from rival Congolese militias skirmished in the northeastern province of Ituri and the death toll from the weeklong spasm of violence rose past 160, the French government indicated today it was preparing to respond to a call by the secretary general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, to send troops to quell the disturbances before they escalated further.

But French diplomats here took pains to point out that Mr. Annan's recent appeal was to France and other governments. Mr. Annan reinforced that point today. "It wasn't a request only to France," he said. "It was a request to governments with capacity."

Mr. Annan further added that "France has indicated in principle that it is prepared to participate in such a force, provided there is a clear mandate, and other governments join in. So we are in touch with other governments trying to see if they will join France in such an effort."

About 700 Uruguayan troops are in the embattled city of Bunia as part of a peacekeeping operation. A Council diplomat said Monday that an additional contingent of Bangladeshi troops was expected to reinforce them.

Calls for international attention to this newly virulent killing ground in the Congolese wars escalated today. Pope John Paul II said that the recent killings — including the deaths of two Roman Catholic priests and 48 others who took refuge in a church in the town of Bunia over the weekend — were "profoundly disturbing."

Echoing the warnings that came from United Nations diplomats Monday, the Vatican statement said, "We risk a tragedy like the one in Rwanda in 1994."

Carla Del Ponte, the war crimes prosecutor at The Hague, picking her words carefully, said to reporters at the United Nations today that "from what we know" the killings in Ituri "could be a genocide."

A genocide, she and aides said, is marked not just by its scope but by the essential fact that victims are chosen for their race.

Militias from the Lendu and Hema groups have been battling for control of Bunia since Ugandan military forces pulled out, with the last troops leaving May 7, The Associated Press reported.

An A.P. dispatch today quoted Patricia Tomé, a United Nations spokeswoman on the scene, as describing fighting as near as 200 yards to United Nations bases in Bunia, where thousands of civilians have taken refuge.

"As we speak, they're using artillery, mortars. You can hear the exchanges of gunfire," she told The Associated Press.

Mr. Annan said today that the United Nations had "asked the Ugandan government to cooperate and use its influence in the region to ensure that the militia and the people in the region restrain themselves and do not escalate tensions in the region."

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