

French Peacekeepers Arrive in Congo

U.N.-Backed Mission Seeks to Quell Ethnic Fighting and Protect Civilians

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BUNIA, Congo, June 6 -- French peacekeepers began arriving today in this shattered town, the first element of a multinational force sent by the United Nations to stop ethnic violence that has killed more than 400 people since early May and displaced thousands.

Residents of Bunia chanted "We are free" as French troops wearing camouflage uniforms and clutching weapons drove through the center of town to the local headquarters of the U.N. mission to Congo, barricaded by loop after loop of razor wire forming a block-long protective corridor.

The French contingent, composed of about 100 logistical and security troops, is part of a 1,400-member force authorized by the U.N. Security Council to quell fighting between the Hema and Lendu ethnic groups, whose militias are battling for control of Bunia. Soldiers from a Hema group called the Union of Congolese Patriots welcomed the peacekeepers but waved their guns and said the French would not intimidate them.

A U.N. force of 700 troops, mostly from Uruguay, has been unable to halt the conflict, partly because its mandate allowed it only to protect U.N. facilities and personnel. The larger French-led force was authorized on May 30 with powers to protect civilians but not to disarm any factions or stop violence outside of Bunia.

Though the town is controlled by the Hema militia, which has agreed to cooperate with the French, the countryside is in the hands of Lendu forces. As a result, Bunia -- once a crossroads of 18 ethnic groups as well as foreigners -- is populated only by Hemas, including refugees from the surrounding area. The town's Lendu residents have fled and are unable to return.

Col. Daniel Vollot, commander of U.N. troops in the region, said there would be a meeting among all parties next week. "There have been a lot of agreements and a lot of problems," Vollot said at the airport as two planes carrying troops and supplies arrived.

Tensions between the Lendus and Hemas, primarily over land, stretch back for generations, but large-scale killing did not break out until Congo descended into civil war in August 1998. More than a half-dozen African countries became involved in the war -- both directly and by supporting local factions -- and the Lendus and Lemas became proxies for Rwanda and Uganda in a struggle over the mineral riches of Congo's northeastern Ituri province. Since 1999, more than 50,000 people have been killed in Ituri in fighting among rival tribes, rebel groups and militias, according to U.N. estimates, and 500,000 have been driven from their homes.

Foreign troops have withdrawn from Congo during the past year under a peace plan reached in April 1999, but the departure of the last of Uganda's troops from Bunia on May 6 left a power vacuum that accelerated the ethnic conflict. The Ugandans left the town in the Lendus' hands, but fighting in recent weeks has put Bunia under Hema control.

Today "there were shots everywhere," said Beatrice Tebabo, 26, as she sat with hundreds of other Hema refugees in a makeshift camp in the back of the U.N. compound. In the steamy heat, under a tarp that shelters seven families, she gazed at her few belongings -- a foam mattress, a few cooking pots -- and said, "I can't leave now."

At Bunia's hospital, others bore witness to the town's misery. A heavily medicated child soldier lay on a foam mattress. Nearby was a woman who had been raped and an injured man who said he saw his family killed.

A 15-year-old boy with round glasses, shaved head, lanky legs, a wide smile and a large cast on his right arm said he was not a Hema or a Lendu, just someone who would rather be home than lying on the hospital floor with others who are crying and in pain.

"It's not possible to go home yet," said the boy, who mentioned he was shot in crossfire as he ran from men with guns.

Aid workers say reports of tension and violence outside Bunia paint an even bleaker picture. "We have everything in place to help these people," said Nigel Pearson, a doctor with Medair who has worked in the region for more than a decade. "We could do it yesterday if we had the security. But we don't, so we can just help people who are here [inside] this bit of barbed wire."