

Congolese Militias Trade Heavy Fire Factions Fight for Control of Town

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BUNIA, Congo, June 7 -- Firefights erupted today all around this tense town in northeastern Congo just a day after the arrival of foreign peacekeepers dispatched by the United Nations to quell fighting between ethnic militias.

Soon after gunfire pierced the silence at 6:30 a.m., thousands of terrified Congolese carrying foam mattresses, suitcases and cooking pots on their heads ran through the streets of Bunia and sought shelter in an already crowded refugee camp at the U.N. military headquarters in the center of town.

"The Lendus are coming!" hollered Papy Papaselte, a 12-year-old boy who hid behind a tree as people scrambled to hide from ethnic Lendu militia forces attacking Bunia from three sides. Some cried. Others shook. Everyone fell to the ground at the sound of guns.

For five hours, automatic weapons, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades boomed from almost every direction as the Lendus tried to fight their way through the ethnic Hema militia defending Bunia. When the shooting subsided, the Hemas still held the town.

Col. Daniel Vollot, commander of the U.N. troops here, said about 1,000 Lendu guerrillas fought to within a few miles of the town before being driven back by the Hemas. Officials said they had no information on casualties and that the area around Bunia was too dangerous for them to search for the dead and wounded.

About 100 French troops arrived here on Friday, the vanguard of a 1,400-member U.N. force sent to try to bring peace to Bunia, where more than 400 people have perished since early May. The French forces, mostly logistics and security specialists, are camped at an airport five miles east of the town.

The Lendus' attack was apparently intended to retake Bunia, which they held as recently as 10 days ago, before the rest of the French-led force arrived, U.N. officials said.

The U.N. headquarters in the center of town, meanwhile, is manned by a mostly Uruguayan force that was dispatched under an earlier U.N. mandate that gave it little power to curtail the fighting.

Neither peacekeeping contingent was involved in the fighting today, and there were no U.N. casualties, Vollot said.

A Uruguayan peacekeeper sitting on a tank in front of the U.N. compound, Juan Bitancour, said his unit had tried to make contact with the ethnic militias. They were unsuccessful, he said, and were ordered back to the compound.

Later, a small force of French soldiers rolled into town in armored vehicles to take control of a key intersection and to meet with a leader of the Hema militia.

"We have tried to talk to both groups and tell them to stop fighting today. But for the Lendu, Bunia is their city and they wanted to try to take it," said Vollot. "But nobody wants to talk and everybody wants to fight."

Vollot's conclusion was echoed by one of the many Hema guerrillas who rode through the town in pickup trucks.

"If the enemy wants us to fight, then we are ready," said Nicole Ibrahim, 19, who brandished a gun and wore a T-shirt emblazoned with a picture of cinema spy Austin Powers and the slogan "Oh, behave at Laura's bat mitzvah."

After the fighting ceased this afternoon, thousands of Hemas who had fled at the sound of gunfire streamed back into Bunia on bicycles and on foot. Some said they had run away because they thought the Lendus would take the city, then returned when they considered it safe -- just one of many journeys back and forth they have made during this town's ordeal.

"Every day you have to run in this town," said Philip Sevabo, 24, who wore a bright yellow soccer jersey and carried a foam mattress. "You can stay one week in your house and then run again."