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FOREIGN DESK

U.N. Council May Request Foreign Force For Congo

By FELICITY BARRINGER (NYT) 472 words

UNITED NATIONS, May 12 -- With memories of unheeded warnings about Rwanda clearly on their minds, Security Council ambassadors today discussed the possibility of inviting a foreign military force to help avert any increase in violence in the Ituri province of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The United Nations secretary general, Kofi Annan, has called on Council members to develop "a coalition of the willing" to provide troops to end the power vacuum. Diplomats from several delegations said they hoped France would lead the effort. The French mission's spokeswoman, emphasizing that the request went to all Council members, said the French government was studying the question.

After the meeting, one United States diplomat said, "We support a member state that is willing to consider this task quickly" -- an implicit nudge to the French to take on the responsibility.

"Regarding troops, every member of the Security Council is considering the request made by the secretary general," a spokeswoman for the French mission said today. "We perfectly well understand the security situation on the ground is not secure," and that the United Nations forces present are not equipped to deal with a mounting conflict.

In Ituri, a diamond-rich region in the northeast, a power vacuum recently emerged when troops from neighboring Uganda withdrew. As a result, two ethnic groups have squared off in violent conflicts, and the number of displaced people has reached nearly 8,000, United Nations spokesmen say.

On Friday, militia groups attacked the United Nations compound housing peacekeeping forces in the town of Bunia, and an area commander for the United Nations was stabbed, a United Nations spokeswoman said. Militias also attacked local United Nations offices and, according to a United Nations spokesman, have fired into crowds seeking shelter near the airport in Bunia.

On Saturday, Mr. Annan called on Uganda to pressure the militias to maintain calm.

"This is very, very serious," one Council diplomat said today. There are currently about 700 Uruguayan peacekeeping forces in Bunia, to be joined soon by Bangladeshi troops, another diplomat said.

These forces are part of a growing United Nations group of more than 5,500 troops and observers in the Congo. The troops in Ituri, a United Nations spokesman, Fred Eckhard, said yesterday, are there to monitor the peacekeeping agreement, not to restrain warring militias from the Hema and Lendu ethnic groups.

Asked if the 1994 killing frenzy in Rwanda was on the minds of Council members, Richard S. Williamson, a senior diplomat of the United States mission, said: "There is no question that that dynamic lies heavy on us. And that's a good thing. It's a good thing we are all conscious of it."

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