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## **French Patrol Exchanges Fire With Militia Near Congo Town**

By REUTERS

BUNIA, Congo, June 14 (Reuters) — French troops sent to stop tribal fighting in the Congolese town of Bunia opened fire today for the first time and made a show of force after encountering gunfire, witnesses said.

Attackers hidden in long grass fired machine guns as a French patrol moved beyond the outskirts of the town, the focus of clashes between rival ethnic militias that have killed hundreds in the past month.

French officers initially said they had been attacked, but after a more detailed assessment they said it was difficult to tell whether they had been fired at or had simply run into a gun battle between rival gunmen.

"It's impossible to say whether the fighting was between militias when we arrived, or whether they were firing directly at the French," Maj. Xavier Pons said.

French troops fired machine guns and several rounds from a light tank accompanying the patrol, which encountered the gunfire while moving along a road through undergrowth two miles from the town center.

There were no immediate reports of casualties.

A reporter traveling with the convoy said French jet fighters flew overhead after gunshots erupted, and troops opened fire. The convoy included 15 all-terrain vehicles, at least one light tank and 70 soldiers.

Fighting between ethnic Hema and Lendu militias has caused chaos in and around Bunia since early May, with hundreds of people killed and tens of thousands fleeing their homes.

The Hema militia controlling the town accused the Lendu of firing on the French patrol.

"We congratulate the international force on today's quick response; these aggressors are always waiting to encroach on the town," said Saba Rafiki, security chief of the Union of Patriotic Congolese, a Rwandan-backed militia of the ethnic Hema community, which seized control of Bunia on May 12.

"However, the French came to our aid, and we ourselves continue to chase these aggressors," he said.

Lendu representatives were not immediately available for comment.

About 400 French troops arrived in Bunia over the past week, the vanguard of a 1,400-strong international force with a United Nations mandate to shield civilians from fighting — using force if necessary. French jet fighters are providing air support.

The French-led international force, which has been approved by the European Union, only has the authority to protect civilians in Bunia, its airport and two nearby refugee camps.

France is providing the largest number of troops. Britain is expected to send some soldiers, while Germany approved plans on Friday to send support staff to Uganda.

Bunia lies in a region of northeast Congo that is terrorized by militias, raising fears among residents that fighting will shift outside the town as the French-led force tightens its grip.

An existing United Nations mission in Congo has no mandate to halt fighting and the French-led force is only expected to stay until Sept. 1, causing concern about the possibility of more violence when it leaves.

More troops are scheduled to arrive in the next few weeks to bolster the operation, which was approved by the European Union in its first military operation outside Europe. Other countries, including Canada and South Africa, are also to take part.