

Belgium prepares to evacuate foreigners from Rwanda

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Reuters, April 8, 1994

BRUSSELS, April 9 (Reuter) - Belgium had paratroops on alert on Saturday ready to help evacuate foreigners from its former African colony of Rwanda, where 10 Belgian U.N. soldiers were killed trying in vain to protect the country's prime minister.

The Belgian government said on Friday it had decided on measures to guarantee the safety of Belgian nationals there, though it gave no details because it wanted to protect lives.

It also said it had urged the United Nations to apply stronger security measures for U.N. troops in Rwanda.

"The government is extremely worried about the deterioration of the situation in Rwanda and particularly about the threats against Belgian nationals," a government statement said.

A Belgian defence ministry spokesman told Reuters the government "gave instructions to the army to prepare the necessary measures for eva-

uation".

Diplomats at the United Nations said Belgium was also considering asking that the peacekeeping force be expanded to include, under a U.N. flag, any troops it might send to rescue its citizens in Rwanda.

The commander of the Belgian U.N. peacekeepers in Rwanda said on Belgian state radio RTBF that a ceasefire was being negotiated between the warring sides and ought to come into effect by 6.30 a.m (0430 GMT) on Saturday morning.

Colonel Luc Marchal said fighting between government forces and Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels continued on Friday afternoon as both sides appeared to be seeking to improve their territorial positions ahead of a ceasefire.

There are about 1,500 Belgian nationals in Rwanda and Government sources said they would have to decide themselves whether they wanted

to leave the country.

Belgian national airline Sabena had said earlier on Friday that a Boeing 737 plane would be on standby in Entebbe, Uganda, on Friday night for the possible evacuation of foreigners.

Rwanda's capital, Kigali, was plunged into an orgy of ethnic violence and looting after the presidents of Burundi and Rwanda were killed on Wednesday when a rocket hit their airliner as they returned from peace talks in Tanzania.

Rwanda, one of the smallest and poorest African states, has suffered from a civil war along tribal lines for four years.

A defence ministry spokesman said two battalions of Belgian paratroops – 800 men – were on alert for a possible evacuation, which could be carried out in cooperation with French forces.

France, which has 600 nationals in Rwanda, has put 8,600 troops at

bases in central and western Africa on alert.

Extra troops would have to be sent for any rescue mission because a 2,500-strong U.N. force in Rwanda has no mandate to protect or evacuate foreign nationals.

The Belgian armed forces said the 10 dead soldiers, part of the U.N. force, were disarmed and executed by Rwandan troops at a military camp in Kigali on Thursday.

They had been protecting Prime Minister Agathe Unilingyimana, whose residence was surrounded. The Belgian soldiers were taken prisoner as they tried to cover her flight and she was killed.

The Belgian government expressed its indignation about the deaths, saying the soldiers, “died in the peaceful exercise of their mission.” Colonel Luc Marchal earlier told Belgian radio their bodies were in a Kigali hospital and would be flown home.

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