

French start Rwanda evacuation; thousands dead

Smerdon, Peter

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KIGALI, April 9 (Reuter) - French troops began evacuating foreigners on Saturday from Rwanda's capital where relief officials said tribal slaughter and renewed civil war had killed tens of thousands of people.

Witnesses said three convoys of foreigners left Kigali by road and headed towards the relative calm of Rwanda's central African neighbour, Burundi.

They said French forces did not control the airport, as previously believed, and the situation in Kigali was chaotic and dangerous.

"An air evacuation is out of the question," one Western diplomat said.

The Red Cross reported tens of thousands had been killed in a two-day orgy of violence which pitted gangs of Hutu tribesmen, backed by renegade army units, against Tutsi rivals accused of killing President Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, last Wednesday.

"Yesterday, we were talking about thousands of dead. Today we can start with tens of thousands," Herve Le Guillouzic, medical coordinator of the International Committee of the Red Cross, told Reuters.

He said corpses were everywhere - "in the houses, in the streets, everywhere".

Reuters Television cameraman Mohamed Shaffi said he filmed one American and one Red Cross convoy snaking their way through the hilly city towards the main road to the Burundi capital.

"It is extremely tense. Roadblocks are manned by large groups of youths wielding knives and handgrenades and warning they will attack and kill French and Belgians," Shaffi said.

Some 400 French troops flew into the city early on Saturday in three military transports, but apparently failed to secure the airport before venturing into the eerily-quiet city where a lull in fighting was reported.

Belgian paratroopers, carrying tonnes of military equipment, were supposed to land later but officials in Brussels said they might be diverted to Burundi or Kenya. French radio reported their planes had been unable to land after Rwandan troops opposed to their arrival blocked the runway.

Colonel Luc Marchal, commander of Belgian forces serving with a 2,500-strong U.N. mission in the country, said government forces had blocked the airport runway with fire trucks after the French troops landed.

He said rebels and government forces were still fighting while aid workers said heavy weapons were being used.

Paul Kagame, leader of the predominantly Tutsi rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), rejected a new interim government and said his troops would attack and take the city.

A spokesman for the Belgian branch of Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF), an international medical charity, said the rebels had launched an attack on the northern town of Ruhengeri.

Gangs of Hutu youths manned roadblocks on the outskirts of Kigali and threatened to kill any Belgians they found.

“They are checking passports, demanding to know your nationality, I have no doubt they would tear apart any Belgians they find,” Reuter reporter Peter Smerdon said.

The Hutus accuse Belgium, the former colonial ruler, of covertly supporting the Tutsi-dominated rebel RPF which has its main office in Belgium.

Residents say rumours in Kigali also blame Belgian peacekeepers for a rocket attack on the plane in which Habyarimana and his Burundi counterpart, Cyprien Ntaryamira, also a Hutu, were travelling last Wednesday.

Belgian Deputy Prime Minister Elio di Rupo said the main mission of his forces was to protect the 1,500 Belgian nationals living in the tiny country but that provision had been made for evacuation if people wanted to leave.

“For now, the chief concern of the government is to do everything to protect our nationals,” di Rupo said.

The United States, which has ordered its 230 citizens there to leave and is making plans for an evacuation, sent 330 Marines and seven military aircraft to Burundi, as well as four C-141 transport aircraft to Kenya.

The United States agreed to lend a C-5 “Galaxy” transport plane to help the Belgian paratroopers with their deployment from Brussels.

French radio said all 600 French nationals in the country had been asked to gather at the compound of the French embassy in Kigali.

Ten Belgian soldiers with the U.N. force were killed on Thursday, trying in vain to protect Rwandan Prime Minister Agathe Unilingyimana. They were disarmed and shot. The prime minister was also killed as she tried to flee.

Some of the troops preparing to leave on Saturday were from the same unit, based at Flawinne near the city of Namur.

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