

Belgium prepares risky Rwanda evacuation

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BRUSSELS, April 11 (Reuter) - Belgium was poised to start a high-risk evacuation of its nationals from Rwanda on Monday as sporadic fighting continued in the capital Kigali.

Paratroops were flown in to Kigali on Sunday as part of an international effort to evacuate Belgians and other expatriates after an orgy of violence in the capital where tens of thousands of people have died following the assassination of the president.

Belgian Defence Minister Leo Delcroix warned of the dangers in the evacuation and said it could take more than a week.

"There are risks in this operation, considering the very complex situation in the country," he said on Belgian radio.

About 1,500 Belgian citizens live in the former Belgian colony, forming the biggest single contingent of Westerners.

"We are giving all Belgians the opportunity to come home. Some we will oblige to return. If other private citizens stay it will be their own responsibility," Delcroix said.

Delcroix said he thought the first evacuees coming direct from Kigali would return on Monday.

About 200 Belgians have gathered in United Nations buildings in Kigali to await evacuation, Belgian radio BRTN reported.

A plane from the Burundian capital Bujumbura with about 90 Belgians on board, mainly woman and children, was due to arrive in Brussels around 0230 GMT. They had left Rwanda separately.

A foreign ministry spokeswoman said some small groups of Belgians were trying to reach Burundi via eastern Zaire.

Belgian troops initially had been denied access to Kigali airport, but Rwandan authorities agreed to open the airport to them on Sunday afternoon after all-night negotiations.

The Belgians are unpopular among the majority Hutu tribe which believes they support the rebels. There were also rumours in Kigali that Belgium was involved in the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana. Belgium has denied both charges.

Belgian armed forces chief-of-staff Lieutenant-General Jose Charlier told a news conference on Sunday eight C-130 transport planes carrying 250 troops

landed at Kigali airport as part of Operation Silver Back, a reference to Rwanda's famous mountain gorillas.

"The second phase of the operation is complete, now the third phase is starting, to evacuate people," Charlier said.

Charlier said evacuations started on Sunday morning, led by French troops and helped by Belgian troops already in Kigali as part of a U.N. force.

The bodies of 10 Belgian soldiers killed last Thursday while trying in vain to protect slain Rwandan Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingyimana were flown to the Kenyan capital Nairobi. Four wounded soldiers were also on the plane, witnesses said.

The bodies will be repatriated to Belgium by midweek, an army spokesman said. The Foreign Ministry said three Belgian civilians were also killed in Kigali last Thursday.

A Belgian woman told RTBF radio that her sister, married to a Rwandan, and her family were killed at the weekend after they took refuge with neighbours.

"She was with a family who was not in the (former) president's camp. They killed everyone except the grandmother because they said it would be a wasted bullet," said the woman, whose identity was not given.

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