

Spanish nuns decide to be evacuated from Rwanda

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MADRID, April 13 (Reuter) - Three Spanish nuns, who had decided to stay in their hospital in Rwanda to protect a group of terrified Tutsis, say they will be evacuated and are being escorted to safety, Spain's Foreign Minister said on Wednesday.

"The three sisters decided last night to be evacuated on condition that a Rwandan colleague was also evacuated," Javier Solana told a news conference in Madrid. He added that the operation would be "very risky".

The four nuns had been trapped in a hospital in Kibuye with a group of Tutsi refugees as Hutu tribesmen gathered outside.

Pilar Espelosin, a 63-year-old member of the Missionary Sisters of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, had been in regular contact with Spanish radio stations, telling of the nuns' fears of an imminent attack by Hutus.

A spokeswoman for the order in Madrid said they had not been able to contact the sisters but assumed if the nuns were leaving, the group of Tutsis must have been taken to safety.

"They did not want to go before because they did not want to leave the refugees alone," said Sister Dolores Garcia.

Two Spanish Hercules aircraft were put on alert on Tuesday, ready to help with evacuations if called on by Belgium, the former colonial power in Rwanda.

"The planes are ready to go but at present there are logistical problems and they could be more of a hindrance than a help," Solana said, adding Belgium had not yet asked for help.

"I am cautiously optimistic that all Spanish citizens will be evacuated," he said. About 30 Spaniards remain in Rwanda.

The government has come under sharp criticism from some Spanish evacuees. Missionary worker Uvaldina Martinez said on Tuesday she was ashamed to be Spanish on her arrival in Nairobi, Kenya as there was nobody on hand from the Spanish embassy.

Solana said there were plans to send more personnel to the embassies of surrounding countries.

In Madrid, an official was fired on Tuesday after he told a distraught nun who phoned his department asking for urgent help for her three trapped colleagues : "We are not here to look for lost nuns in the jungle".

Solana said he would discuss the civil war in Rwanda with United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali who arrives in Madrid late on Wednesday for an official visit.

“We will discuss (Rwanda) on behalf of the European Union and especially Belgium to see if the Security Council could take some initiative over the next few hours,” Solana said.

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