

Belgium says U.N. mandate was inflexible in Rwanda

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BRUSSELS, April 20 (Reuter) - Belgian peacekeepers returned home on Wednesday from a failed U.N. mission in Rwanda seen by many as doomed from the start because of an inflexible mandate from the United Nations.

Defence Minister Leo Delcroix joined many of his troops in criticising the U.N. mandate in Rwanda, where 10 Belgian peacekeepers died in tribal violence set off by the assassination of President Juvenal Habyarimana on April 6.

"Delcroix has for many months pleaded for a more flexible mandate for the local U.N. commanders, who are the best placed to take rapid decisions and implement them," a defence ministry statement said.

"This is necessary to assure the security of our men and the efficiency of missions," it added.

The final batch of 300 Belgian peacekeepers was airlifted to neighbouring Tanzania on Tuesday night and then on to Kenya where they boarded flights for home.

In Kigali on Wednesday, terrified peacekeepers from Bangladesh scrambled aboard planes as the U.N. mission neared total collapse and bloody chaos.

Belgian troops returning this week spoke of their disgust for the U.N. mission, and some soldiers publicly burned their trademark U.N. blue berets while others ripped them up into shreds in front of television cameras.

"We lost some dignity there and all because the big guns, the fools in the armchairs in New York, did not allow us to intervene," one peacekeeper told Belgian journalists.

Soldiers returning to Melsbroek military airport outside Brussels on Wednesday said emotions had run high among Belgian troops after the murder of 10 of their colleagues.

"Everyone is very, very sad. There will be no parties now that we have returned to Belgium," one told RTBF radio.

The 10 Belgian peacekeepers were tortured and killed while trying in vain to defend the prime minister, who was hunted down after Habyarimana's assassination.

About 450 Belgian U.N. peacekeepers were part of the 2,500 strong mission sent to Rwanda to oversee a peace accord which was brokered between the government and rebels from the Rwanda Patriotic Front.

The U.N. rules of engagement allowed troops only to fire in self-defence. In a country awash with weapons, the confiscation of weapons in Rwanda was largely left to local police.

Military sources said the U.N. should immediately have adjusted the mandate when Habyarimana's plane was shot down.

"There's the strong feeling there are not enough military people in New York and that it is too full of politicians. We were powerless to react," one military source told Reuters.

Belgium has committed more than 12,000 U.N. peacekeepers in the past two years, and Delcroix said the country would still take part in U.N. peacekeeping operations.

"It is our responsibility to take part in these operations which try to defuse conflicts threatening international security," the defence ministry statement said.

Le Soir newspaper Central Africa expert, Colette Brackmann, said in an editorial that despite the U.N.'s inflexibility, it was important for Belgium to maintain its presence in Africa.

"The mandate for the blue helmets was not sufficiently clear, not sufficiently flexible and the decision-making procedures were too slow and bureaucratic. But to abandon the principle of U.N. intervention and not participate would encourage the law of the jungle," Braeckman wrote.

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