

Belgium, France consider evacuation from Rwanda

Lorrayne Smith

Reuters, April 8, 1994

BRUSSELS, April 8 (Reuter) - Belgium put paratroops on alert to evacuate foreigners from its former African colony of Rwanda on Friday after 10 Belgian soldiers were killed trying in vain to protect the country's prime minister.

After an emergency cabinet meeting, the government urged the United Nations to take stronger security measures for U.N. forces in Rwanda and said it had decided on unspecified measures to guarantee the safety of Belgian nationals there.

The government said it was giving no details because it wanted to protect lives.

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

The commander of the Belgian U.N. peacekeepers in Rwanda said on Belgian state radio RTBF that a cea-

sefire 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.

In Paris, military sources said France was considering using troops stationed in the Central African Republic to evacuate its 600 nationals from Rwanda.

Belgium has about 1,500 nationals in Rwanda. Government sources earlier said it would be up to them to decide if they wanted to leave.

A spokesman for Belgian national airline Sabena said 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 plane.

"There is continuous fighting, there is pillaging and killing... Things have got completely out of hand," Belgian radio correspondent Katrien Van der Schoot said from Kigali.

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.

He said the first troops could leave later on Friday and be in Rwanda by noon local time on Saturday if the government gave the go-ahead. France 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.

Belgium, which built up a huge empire in central Africa in the 19th century, has often sent paratroops to restore order or rescue nationals since it gave up colonies such as Zaire and Rwanda. Rwanda became independent in 1962.

Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene cut short a holiday in Malta to return to Brussels on Friday.

The Belgian armed forces said in a statement 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.

The Belgians 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.

Colonel Luc Marchal earlier told Belgian radio the bodies of the dead soldiers were now in a Kigali hospital and would be flown home.

(c) Reuters Limited 1994