

Belgium, U.S. poised to try to rescue nationals.

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KIGALI, April 9 (Reuter) - Belgian and U.S. troops were poised on Saturday to sweep into the killing fields of Rwanda and save nationals trapped in tribal bloodletting and renewed civil war feared to have cost the lives of thousands.

The United States, its ambassador's residence in Kigali under attack, ordered 255 Americans to quit the landlocked central African state. It said on Friday it was making evacuation plans.

The bloodbath, triggered by the murder of the presidents of both Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi late on Wednesday, has seen nuns, priests, aid workers and U.N. peacekeepers fall victim of ethnic hatreds dating back centuries.

In Gatuna, 80 km (50 miles) north of Kigali, Rwandan rebels said early on Saturday they had decided to fight government troops rampaging in Kigali to restore order because of "murderous acts" committed there this week.

"The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) is going to protect innocent Banyarwanda (Rwandan people). Anyone standing in its way will be considered an accomplice and dealt with accordingly," a statement broadcast on RPF radio by the group's commander in chief, Major-General Paul Kagame, said.

Belgium, shocked by the slaying of 10 Belgian "Blue Berets" operating under United Nations command who tried in vain on Thursday night to save Rwanda's prime minister from attacking soldiers, has put crack paratroopers on alert.

But, with the airport controlled by renegade Rwandan army troops, Brussels was trying first to get the U.N. to change its mandate to let peacekeepers use force in the former Belgian colony and evacuate more than 1,500 Belgians and about 600 French nationals.

Belgium has about 400 soldiers in Rwanda as part of the U.N. peacekeeping contingent and wants any new troops it might send to be put under U.N. control. "They didn't want them wearing two hats," said one envoy at U.N. headquarters in New York.

Unconfirmed reports said elite U.S. forces were likely to dash overland into the hilly capital from neighbouring Burundi early on Saturday.

Prudence Bushnell, a U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state, refused to go into detail, saying only "there are a number of plans in the works about evacuation." But she acknowledged the airport was currently "off limits".

"We issued an ordered departure, and what that means is that we are going to be looking at plans to take out the Americans, the official Americans and their dependents, and American citizens," she told a news briefing.

Red Cross officials in the rambling hillside capital Kigali reported the central hospital overflowing with dead and wounded and said the death toll could run into thousands.

“Our medical coordinator visited the central hospital in Kigali and found it overflowing with dead and wounded. There were 300 to 400 corpses in the hospital, the morgue was full,” Patrick Gasser, deputy head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) here, told Reuters by telephone.

Earlier, the head of the ICRC in Rwanda, Philippe Gaillard, said the death toll probably ran into thousands.

“These are brothers killing each other – there has been an urban civil war raging in Kigali for the last two days,” he told French radio. “There have probably been thousands of dead in Kigali between Wednesday night and today.”

But Belgian state radio quoted the commander of the Belgian U.N. peacekeepers in Rwanda as saying a ceasefire was being negotiated and could come into effect by Saturday morning.

A U.N. peacekeeping force, stationed in Rwanda to monitor a derailed peace accord between rebels and government forces, said late on Friday the security situation was “still precarious”.

It said in a statement RPF rebels had captured several positions previously held by an elite presidential guard loyal to dead president Juvenal Habyarimana. The statement said the RPF had also announced its intention to send more forces into the capital from bases just outside.

On Friday, before the RPF radio broadcast early on Saturday, the rebel leader, Kagame, had told reporters : “There is absolute anarchy. No government, no authority. We have to move to restore order if this continues.”

In New York, the International Rescue Committee relief organisation said 4,000 Rwandan refugees had poured across the border into neighbouring Tanzania. It predicted the refugee exodus could swell to 150,000.

Rwanda and Burundi have a bloody history of tribal rivalry pitting the majority Hutu against the Tutsi, the former feudal overlords. Tens of thousands of members of both tribes have died in recurring bouts of ethnic bloodletting.

Relief workers said Burundi, where up to 50,000 people died in violence following the October assassination of the country’s first democratically elected Hutu president, was calm.

Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, a Hutu serving in a four-party coalition with Habyarimana, was killed by soldiers on Thursday and three ministers kidnapped.

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