

# Belgium tries to get paras into stricken Rwanda

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BRUSSELS, April 10 (Reuter) - Belgium struggled on Sunday to get 400 crack paratroops into Rwanda as part of an international force to protect and evacuate foreigners from its former African colony, after they were unable to land in the stricken country.

Belgium has 1,500 citizens – the biggest contingent of foreign nationals – in the tiny central African state that has been plunged into chaos by civil war and ethnic strife. Some Belgians have managed to flee overland.

Although the Rwandan government had dropped earlier objections to the troops landing in the capital Kigali, officials said government forces at the airport were still opposed to their arrival.

Those forces had blocked the runway with fire trucks.

“Our analysis is that at the moment we don’t have a green light,” said Colonel Freddy van de Weghe, a spokesman for the Belgian armed forces.

Government sources said Belgium was making intense diplomatic efforts to resolve the problem and hoped to get a final go-ahead later on Sunday for the paratroops to fly into Kigali. For now, they have landed in neighbouring countries.

The Belgians are unpopular among the majority Hutu tribe which believes they support the rebels.

Officials said there were also strong rumours in Kigali that Belgium, the former colonial power, had been involved in the assassination of Rwanda’s president last week.

Belgium had put a force of 800 paratroops on alert for Rwanda. Some 400 have left and others are expected to do so in the coming hours and days. Military sources said earlier information that all 800 had left was incorrect.

Four hundred French soldiers landed at Kigali airport on Saturday and have already begun evacuating some 600 French nationals living in Rwanda. More than 300 U.S. Marines have deployed to Bujumbura, the capital of neighbouring Burundi.

Thousands are reported to have been killed in fighting this week which followed the assassination of the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi last Wednesday.

Rwanda has been gripped by a four-year civil war which has pitted the Hutus against the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels of the minority Tutsi tribe.

The Hutus accuse Belgium of covertly supporting the RPF which has its main office in Brussels. Belgium insists that it has remained neutral in the

conflict.

The rebels, who have vowed to smash the interim government and are sending major forces towards the capital, warned France, Belgium and the United States on Saturday to limit their troop deployments to rescuing their nationals.

“The Rwanda Patriotic Front will not give any warning to those who seek to transform what they claim as humanitarian missions into military assistance for autocratic regimes which are close to the end,” said a statement issued in Brussels.

Ten Belgian soldiers with the U.N. force were killed on Thursday, trying in vain to protect Rwandan Prime Minister Agathe Unilingyimana. They were disarmed and shot. The prime minister was also killed as she tried to flee.

Some of the troops preparing to leave at the weekend were from the same unit, based at Flawinne near the city of Namur.

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