

Belgian U.N. troops in Rwanda ready to leave

Lauwers, Bert

Reuters, April 16, 1994

BRUSSELS, April 16 (Reuter) - Belgium said on Saturday it was set for a fast withdrawal of its 420 United Nations peacekeepers from Rwanda.

"The go-ahead has been given," Foreign Minister Claes told a news conference. He said all conditions, political and military, had been met for the peacekeepers' departure.

"There is no time to waste," Claes said. He declined to give details on the evacuation plan.

"It's impossible to give a precise date," Belgian armed forces spokesman Colonel Gilbert Hertoghe said.

"The most likely solution seems to be a road convoy. We think this is a safe and economical way to leave the country," Hertoghe told Belgian BRTN radio.

Belgium is pulling out its contingent in the U.N. force partly because of a wave of anti-Belgian anger among Rwanda's Hutu majority.

Many Hutus believe the Belgians support the country's rebels and were involved in the assassination of President Juvenal Habyarimana, who died in an attack on his plane this month. Belgium has denied the accusations.

Claes said that about 100 people, mainly Europeans, were waiting at Kigali airport for evacuation.

The Security Council has not yet decided on the future of the 2,500-member U.N. Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), set up last year to help implement an agreement signed in Arusha, Tanzania, aimed at ending a three-year civil war.

The Belgians' role was seen as pivotal in the contingent.

U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali has already said that the Belgians' withdrawal was allowed.

Claes said on Thursday that Belgium, the former colonial power in Rwanda, would withdraw its U.N. contingent, no matter what the U.N. Security Council might decide.

Claes also said that the UNAMIR force commander, Canadian Brigadier-General Rome Dallaire, had already received orders to evacuate the Belgian troops.

The minister said the situation in Kigali, scene of an orgy of ethnic violence between the Hutu and minority Tutsi tribes, was deteriorating.

He added the Kigali airport runway could be destroyed during fighting between government and rebel forces.

Claes also said he had been informed by “good sources” that the government troops might attack the Belgian peacekeepers.

Hertoghe said earlier that Belgium had sent more troops than previously announced to Rwanda for the evacuation of the 1,500 Belgian nationals there.

“About 750 (Belgian troops) took part in the evacuation in Rwanda,” colonel Gilbert Hertoghe told Reuters. Another 200 extra troops were on standby in Nairobi, Kenya, he said.

Belgium earlier announced it had sent just 400 paratroops.

Army officials said they had kept silent about the extra troops because Rwanda had only given permission to send 400.

(c) Reuters Limited 1994