

Belgium to refuse U.N. missions until autumn

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BRUSSELS, April 21 (Reuter) - Belgium will turn down all new U.N. requests to provide peacekeeping troops for at least several months because of the killing of 10 of its soldiers in Rwanda, Defence Minister Leo Delcroix said on Thursday.

"If we're being asked for new missions, I believe we'll pass for a while," Delcroix told BRTN radio.

"We'll need a few months to recover from that blow and look into the situation again in the autumn."

The 10 soldiers were tortured and killed after trying in vain to defend the prime minister of Rwanda, who was hunted down in a tribal bloodbath after the assassination of President Juvenal Habyarimana on April 6.

"I'm trying to make clear that we cannot...act as if nothing happened. Those 10 boys were murdered in a cowardly way which left a very deep impression on the army and me," Delcroix said.

"I believe we have to contemplate, let the army calm down a bit mentally to recover from that blow."

Delcroix said this did not mean an end to present Belgian U.N. missions, saying it would keep its troops in former Yugoslavia.

Belgium has committed more than 12,000 U.N. peacekeepers in the past two years in Rwanda, Somalia, former Yugoslavia and Cambodia.

About 430 Belgian peacekeepers were part of the 2,500-strong U.N. mission sent to Rwanda to oversee a peace accord brokered between the government and the Rwanda Patriotic Front.

A Belgian military spokesman said most of the peacekeepers should have returned to Belgium by Thursday evening. "Certainly 95 percent," he said.

But about 660 troops, some of extra forces sent to evacuate Belgian nationals from Rwanda, would stay in Nairobi in case violence broke out in Burundi and another evacuation mission was needed.

Belgium's armed forces commander, Lieutenant-General Jose Charlier, told RTBF radio that the Rwanda evacuation had been the most difficult mission in Africa for many years.

Some Belgian peacekeepers returning to Brussels this week said they were disgusted by the U.N. mandate which prevented them intervening to prevent the massacre of civilians.

Several of them burned their U.N. blue berets before leaving Rwanda or tore off their U.N. badges. One cut up his beret in front of television cameras.

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