

# Belgium sends paras to Rwanda as fighting rages

Doughty, Nicholas

Reuters, April 9, 1994

BRUSSELS, April 9 (Reuter) - Belgium sent crack paratroops to Rwanda on Saturday as part of an international force to protect and evacuate foreigners from its former African colony, torn apart by a civil war along ethnic lines.

Military sources said an advance detachment of paratroops, including eight C-130 transport planes packed with military equipment, left Belgium for the Rwandan capital Kigali.

Most of the force of 800 paratroopers – two battalions – was expected to leave later on Saturday, taking plenty of heavy equipment and vehicles in case the troops are caught up in the fierce fighting between rebels and government forces.

Some 280 French paratroops had flown in to secure the airport in Kigali before dawn on Saturday and Paris said 120 more would be sent later to prepare for the possible evacuation of some 600 nationals living in Rwanda.

Belgian Deputy Prime Minister Elio di Rupo said the main mission was to protect the 1,500 Belgian nationals living in the tiny central African state but that provision had been made for evacuation if people wanted to leave.

“For now, the chief concern of the government is to do everything to protect our nationals,” di Rupo said.

The United States, which has ordered its 230 citizens there to leave the country and is making plans for an evacuation, sent 330 Marines and seven military aircraft to neighbouring Burundi, as well as four C-141 transport aircraft to Kenya.

The United States also agreed to lend a C-5 “Galaxy” transport plane to help the Belgian paratroops with their deployment from Brussels.

Although savage fighting which broke out in Kigali after the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi were assassinated on Wednesday had abated initially by early Saturday, a ceasefire reported by the United Nations then appeared to break down completely.

Colonel Luc Marchal, the commander of Belgian forces serving with a 2,500-strong U.N. mission in the country, said Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels and government forces were still fighting. Aid workers said heavy weapons were being used.

Rwandan rebel leader Paul Kagame rejected a new interim government and said his troops would attack and take the city.

Marchal said government forces had blocked the airport runway with fire trucks after the French troops landed.

Belgian radio said the paratroops from Brussels might be forced to land at Entebbe airport in Uganda or in Burundi.

A spokesman for the Belgian branch of Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF), an international medical charity, said the rebels had launched an attack on the northern town of Ruhengeri.

The spokesman said there were some 350 dead at the main hospital in Kigali, where a team from MSF was working.

Hundreds of people have been reported killed in this week's violence, including political leaders, aid workers, nuns, priests and Belgian U.N. peacekeepers.

The Belgian government said on Friday it had decided on measures to guarantee the safety of its nationals in Rwanda.

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 on Saturday were from the same unit, based at Flawinne near the city of Namur.

Diplomats at the United Nations said Belgium was also considering asking that the peacekeeping force be expanded to include, under a U.N. flag, any troops it sent to Rwanda.

But the United Nations force currently has no mandate to evacuate or protect foreign nationals.

Kigali was plunged into an orgy of ethnic violence and looting after the presidents of Burundi and Rwanda were killed on Wednesday. The plane they were travelling in was downed by a rocket but it is not clear who was responsible for the attack.

Rwanda, one of the poorest African states, has suffered from a civil war along tribal lines for four years, pitting the Hutu majority against the Tutsi minority.

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

(c) Reuters Limited 1994