

Belgium struggles with African colonial legacy

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BRUSSELS, April 10 (Reuter) - More than one hundred years ago, Belgium built an empire that brought unimaginable wealth to the kingdom and untold misery to the people of central Africa. It also left a painful legacy.

Amid the bloodshed and civil war in Rwanda, Belgians again watched in horror as their soldiers died in a faraway country and, not for the first time, Belgium sought to send troops to a former colony to protect and rescue its nationals.

Although Belgium gave up its empire in the 1960s, it has spent millions of dollars in aid and thousands of aid workers, missionaries and business people remained in countries like Zaire and Rwanda.

But, after the killing of 10 Belgian soldiers who tried in vain to protect Rwanda's prime minister last week, opinion is divided over whether the country should feel any continuing obligation to help to restore order and save lives.

"Once again, the blood of Belgian soldiers has flowed in Africa," the right-wing daily *La Derniere Heure* wrote in an editorial on Saturday.

"If the local tribes want to slaughter each other for the 10th or 15th time in 20 years, that's their business, not ours! The Rwandans won their independence, let them manage it as they see fit. And let them pay for their mistakes."

Some other papers said Belgium, which ruthlessly exploited the mineral and natural wealth of its African territories for decades, had no choice but to remain engaged.

"Does Belgium have the right to turn away from a country for which it is still responsible?" asked the daily *Libre Belgique*.

It was King Leopold II who started the drive to make Belgium a colonial power as he saw Britain, France, Germany and other European powers grabbing vast tracts of land all over the globe in the late nineteenth century.

Leopold claimed the Congo, which became Zaire after independence, as a personal fiefdom although the Belgian government took it over in 1908.

Rwanda and Burundi, part of the German empire in Africa, were handed over to Belgium as protectorates after Germany was defeated in World War One.

The Belgians in Africa cut roads through the jungle, built schools, hospitals, fine villas. They set up and ran administrations. They made money.

Life was sometimes hard for the colonial masters but it was much harder for the Africans. The cruelty and degradation were immortalised in Joseph Conrad's

novel "Heart of Darkness."

By the 1950s, Belgium was under pressure, like other colonial powers, to relinquish control. Zaire was granted independence in 1960, Rwanda in 1962.

Since then, Belgium has frequently run into trouble with the countries it once ruled.

In July 1960, paratroops intervened to evacuate thousands from the Belgian Congo, which was gripped by a civil war. In 1964, the red berets were called in again to free hostages held in Stanleyville, now called Kisangani.

In 1978, 1,000 paratroops descended on Kolwezi in Zaire to rescue people from more fighting.

When civil war flared in Rwanda in 1990 between the minority Tutsi and majority Hutu tribes, 300 Belgians were evacuated. Even before Rwanda won independence, ethnic bloodshed had claimed thousands of lives.

Paratroops went back to Zaire in 1991 when more civil disturbances erupted and thousands of foreigners were pulled out.

Belgium and other Western powers tolerated the iron-fisted rule of Zairean President Mobutu Sese Seko, who seized power in 1965, during the Cold War because of the country's strategic importance and mineral wealth.

But, as Zaire slides further into chaos and poverty, relations have chilled. Belgium suspended aid and cooperation in 1990 and has put increasing pressure on Mobutu to step down.

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