

Belgium prepares risky Rwanda evacuation

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BRUSSELS, April 11 (Reuter) - Belgium was poised to start a high-risk evacuation of its nationals from Rwanda on Monday as sporadic fighting continued in the capital Kigali.

The commander of Belgian troops serving as part of a 2,500-strong U.N. force in the country said there was still firing in parts of the capital but the fighting was less intense than in previous days.

"Police are trying to get security under control and are rooting out looters," Colonel Luc Marchal told Belgian radio.

Paratroops were flown in to Kigali on Sunday as part of an international effort to evacuate Belgians and other expatriates after an orgy of violence in the capital where tens of thousands of people have died following the assassination of the country's president last week.

Some 90 Belgians - there are 1,500 in the former Belgian colony, the biggest contingent of Westerners - arrived in Brussels on Monday on a flight from neighbouring Burundi. They had escaped in an overland convoy from southern Rwanda.

A Belgian army spokesman said two C-130 transport planes were on standby at Kigali airport to fly out evacuees. They could take a total of 120 people, he said.

Belgian troops also were going to other regions this morning, except northern Rwanda where there is fighting between rebel forces and government troops, to escort nationals who wanted to be repatriated.

Belgian Defence Minister Leo Delcroix warned on Sunday of the dangers in the evacuation and said it could take more than a week. "There are risks in this operation, considering the very complex situation in the country," he said.

"We are giving all Belgians the opportunity to come home. Some we will oblige to return. If other private citizens stay it will be their own responsibility," Delcroix said.

Delcroix said he thought the first evacuees coming direct from Kigali would return on Monday.

About 200 Belgians have gathered in United Nations buildings in Kigali to await evacuation, Belgian radio BRTN reported.

Belgian troops initially had been denied access to Kigali airport, but Rwandan authorities agreed to open the airport to them on Sunday afternoon after all-night negotiations.

The Belgians are unpopular among the majority Hutu tribe which believes they support the rebels. There were also rumours in Kigali that Belgium was involved in the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana. Belgium has denied both charges.

Belgian armed forces chief-of-staff Lieutenant-General Jose Charlier told a news conference on Sunday eight C-130 transport planes carrying 250 troops landed at Kigali airport as part of Operation Silver Back, a reference to Rwanda's famous mountain gorillas.

"The second phase of the operation is complete, now the third phase is starting, to evacuate people," Charlier said.

Charlier said evacuations started on Sunday morning, led by French troops and helped by Belgian troops already in Kigali as part of a U.N. force.

The bodies of 10 Belgian soldiers killed last Thursday while trying in vain to protect slain Rwandan Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingyimana were flown to the Kenyan capital Nairobi. Four wounded soldiers were also on the plane, witnesses said.

The bodies will be repatriated to Belgium by midweek, an army spokesman said. The Foreign Ministry said three Belgian civilians were also killed in Kigali last Thursday.

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