

Belgians returning from Rwanda tell of butchery

Smith, Lorraine

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BRUSSELS, April 12 (Reuter) - The first Belgians evacuated by paratroops from Rwanda arrived in Brussels on Tuesday, with tales of the butchery and horror they witnessed during days of ethnic slaughter in the former Belgian colony.

Many were too shocked to speak of their experiences in the city, while others described seeing mutilated corpses in the streets when they dared to leave their houses.

Belgium, like other Western nations, has begun evacuating its 1,500 nationals from the tiny central African state following the violence that flared last week after the president was assassinated in a rocket attack on his plane.

"We were on the terrace when we heard the rocket attack - though we didn't know what it was. The fighting began the next morning and our (Rwandan) housekeeper warned us not to leave the house," said Marc Hellingh, who had been visiting friends.

"When it was quiet we went outside, and saw French paratroops. They asked us if we wanted to be evacuated and we seized the chance," he said.

Hellingh described seeing Rwandans armed with machetes at the roadside and trucks piled with bodies.

"It was butchery," he said.

A DC-10 flew 192 evacuees into Brussels national airport early on Tuesday and a further 204 people arrived on a Boeing 747 a few hours later. A third plane carrying about 200 was expected later on Tuesday.

Mostly Belgians, the evacuees had been airlifted from Kigali to Nairobi, at the request of the Belgian government, in Belgian military C-130 planes and then flown directly to Brussels on planes belonging to the Belgian national airline, Sabena.

Mireille Jacob, a Belgian who had been on her first visit to Rwanda said she had stayed inside for five days and nights during the fighting.

"The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) were behind us and the government troops in front - our house was between. If they had wanted to touch us, they could have," she said.

"We had no electricity or telephone, and had to eat what we had - pancakes, potatoes. There was looting," she added, describing seeing mutilated corpses.

Belgium's Foreign Ministry denied reports that its ambassador had fled Kigali with the German and French envoys and arrived in neighbouring Burundi.

The ministry said it was still in telephone contact with the ambassador in Kigali where he was continuing his work.

Defence Minister Leo Delcroix warned on Sunday of the risks in the evacuation and said it could take more than a week.

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 Foreign Minister Willy Claes defended in a radio interview on Tuesday the presence of Belgian troops in Rwanda as part of the United Nations force but said the U.N. mandate had probably been too limited.

Ten Belgian peacekeepers were murdered in Kigali last Thursday as they tried to protect the prime minister who was later slain.

Claes said that Belgium had sent troops at the request of the Rwandan authorities and the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which groups Rwandan rebels.

“But we refused to lead the operation which is why we sent about half the troops requested,” he told Belgian radio.

Tribal violence has been a bloody theme in the history of both Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi, which became independent in 1962.

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