

Belgium hurries to evacuate last nationals from Rwanda

Lauwers, Bert

Reuters, April 13, 1994

BRUSSELS, April 13 (Reuter) - Belgium hurried to evacuate the last of its nationals from Rwanda on Wednesday as the capital Kigali echoed with heavy artillery, mortar and cannon fire between Rwandan rebels and government forces.

"They are still getting people out from the interior (of Rwanda)," an armed forces spokesman said. He said he had been informed that some members of religious orders were planning to stay.

Another spokesman said all the Belgians in Kigali had been evacuated to the airport but he had no information on about 20 still to be picked up from the interior.

There were 1,500 Belgians in Rwanda. Belgium, like other Western nations, started evacuating its nationals when violence flared last week after president Juvenal Habyarimana was assassinated in a rocket attack on his plane.

Belgium wants its nationals out before a Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) rebel ultimatum for all foreigners to leave the country expires. But it was unclear whether the ultimatum expired Wednesday or Thursday night.

The ultimatum does not apply to the U.N. peacekeeping forces.

Belgium's ambassador to Rwanda, Johan Swinnen, landed in Brussels on Wednesday aboard a Boeing 747 with about 425 people.

"He was one of the most targeted (foreign) residents in Rwanda because he had been blamed for a number of things," Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene told BRTN Belgian radio.

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 the president whose plane was shot down as it landed in Kigali.

Belgium has denied the rumours.

BRTN quoted Swinnen as saying the embassy was no longer safe and that a local radio station had called for the killing of all Belgians in Rwanda.

The radio said earlier that United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali has agreed Belgium could withdraw its contingent of U.N. peacekeepers from Rwanda.

Belgium has 430 "blue helmets" in Rwanda as part of the 2,500-strong U.N. Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), formed last year to help implement

an accord signed in Arusha, Tanzania, by the Rwandan government and the RPF.

Ten of the 430 were killed last week while trying to protect Rwanda's Prime Minister who was later killed.

The Belgian peacekeepers have since been joined by at least 400 paratroops sent to evacuate foreigners.

"Boutros-Ghali has responded positively to the request by (Belgian Foreign) minister Claes to withdraw the Belgian blue helmets from Rwanda," BRTN said.

Claes met Boutros-Ghali in Bonn on Tuesday evening.

BRTN said the U.N. chief would still like a formal decision from the U.N. Security Council, adding the council could meet today. "This way Belgium would avoid a unilateral withdrawal of its troops," BRTN said.

A spokeswoman for Dehaene said the government had discussed a possible withdrawal of Belgian U.N. troops. But she said she could not confirm that Belgium wanted to pull its blue helmets out of Rwanda.

Six Belgian civilians have also been killed in the ethnic violence.

(c) Reuters Limited 1994