

Belgium steps up troop pullout from Rwanda

Smerdon, Peter

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KIGALI, April 15 (Reuter) - Belgium stepped up its troop withdrawal from blood-soaked Rwanda where many thousands of people have been killed in an orgy of ethnic violence involving the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi tribes.

The capital, Kigali, remained a contested area with forces of the Hutu-dominated government and rebels of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) trading heavy fire for a sixth successive day.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said it was suspending its work there after gunmen massacred wounded civilians under its care.

Foreign Minister Willy Claes said Belgium had decided to withdraw its contingent of United Nations peacekeeping soldiers from the war-torn central African state.

"The Belgian blue helmets will stay under no circumstances," Claes told a news conference. "No matter what the decision of the (U.N.) Security Council may be, they will not continue to take part in the U.N. operation."

He said the U.N. peacekeeping mission, originally intended to implement a peace agreement signed last year, no longer had a purpose. "We do not believe that the presence of the blue helmets in the current situation makes any sense," he said.

A total of 16 Belgians, including 10 soldiers, have been killed in the violence raging in the former Belgium colony, one of the world's poorest and smallest countries.

The Canadian commander of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) said it could not yet protect refugees hiding in churches because it was trying to resupply itself in the chaos and it had to consider that its mandate was peacekeeping.

"I've had vehicles shot up, buses shot up, soldiers killed. We've been withdrawing and reestablishing ourselves," Brigadier-General Romeo Dallaire said.

ICRC officials said they suspended operations to evacuate casualties after armed civilians at a roadblock in Kigali stopped an ICRC vehicle, dragged out six wounded civilians and shot them dead in front of ICRC staff.

In Geneva, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said at least 30 Rwandan Red Cross workers had been killed in the fighting and the toll could rise.

"The workers were all killed as they helped families, friends and strangers while the wave of violence swept through the capital," the IFRC Red Cross said

in a statement.

ICRC workers wept at their headquarters in Kigali on Thursday as they received phone calls from terrified workers and their families unable to reach the relative safety of the ICRC compound.

Relief workers said massacres of civilians which began last week after President Juvenal Habyarimana was killed in a plane crash were still continuing.

An aid official, who declined to be identified, said : "There are massacres of civilians in the city and in the country. Most of them are being carried out by militiamen helped by government forces."

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