

Belgian peacekeepers to pull out of Rwanda from Tuesday

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BRUSSELS, April 17 (Reuter) - Belgium's 420 United Nations peacekeepers in Rwanda can start withdrawing from the country from Tuesday, a Belgian armed forces spokesman said on Sunday.

"In principle they can start leaving from Tuesday," the spokesman told Reuters.

The Belgian troops in Rwanda, gripped by savage fighting between soldiers and rebels and unabated killing of civilians, would be relieved on Monday by peacekeepers from Ghana.

"Tomorrow the airport (of Kigali) will be handed over to their Ghanaian colleagues," the spokesman said.

The spokesman said the option had been taken to leave Kigali airport overland with a convoy of about 150 vehicles.

Belgian Foreign Minister Willy Claes said there was a danger that the airport runway could be destroyed during fighting between government and rebel forces with modern artillery.

"The airport and certainly the runway could be seriously damaged, so quite a lot of troops could become trapped like rats in a net," Claes told Belgian BRTN television.

The foreign minister also said he believed this month's assassination of Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana was part of a well-prepared plan.

"What strikes me... in a country where one is not organised in such an exemplary way, is that all access roads to the airport were closed off 10 minutes after the accident and that the massacres started more than 100 kilometres from Kigali less than one hour after the downing of the plane," Claes said.

"If you also see the fairly systematic way in which members of the opposition and moderates were massacred, I cannot get rid of the impression that the downing of the plane was point number one of a well-prepared plan," he told BRTN television.

Habyarimana and President Cyprien Ntaryamira of neighbouring Burundi were killed on April 6 when a rocket hit their plane as they were returning from regional peace talks in Tanzania.

Claes said he believed a small group of extremist Hutus, who form the majority in Rwanda, had an interest in preventing the Arusha peace agreement from

being signed.

The Arusha accord, signed last August, was to end a three-year civil war between the then government, formed by the majority Hutu ethnic group, and the Rwandese Patriotic Front, including many Tutsi exiles who came in from neighbouring Uganda.

The United Nations says it is still unclear who killed the two presidents. Belgium has requested a U.N. investigation.

Part of the Hutus, who form the majority in Rwanda, believe the Belgians, who had 430 U.N. peacekeepers in Kigali when the plane was shot down, were involved in the assassination of Habyarimana. Belgium has denied the accusations.

Ten Belgian U.N. peacekeepers and six Belgian civilians were killed as an orgy of bloodletting swept the Rwandan capital after the president's death.

The armed forces spokesman said the peacekeepers' trip out might take several days and would probably go towards Tanzania.

About 100 mostly European civilians, waiting at the airport for evacuation, would be flown out of Kigali to the Kenyan capital Nairobi and not accompany the peacekeepers, he said.

Belgium's paratroopers in Nairobi, who evacuated Belgian nationals and other foreigners earlier this month, would probably start returning home from Monday, he said.

About 750 Belgian paratroops took part in the evacuation in Rwanda. Another 200 were on standby in Nairobi.

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