

Belgian paratroopers leave for Rwanda

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BRUSSELS, April 9 (AFP) - Two aircraft carrying Belgian paratroopers bound for Kigali left here Saturday, a Belgian military official said.

He declined to say whether the planes would stop en route or fly directly.

The men were drawn from two battalions of Belgian paratroopers – about 800 men – who had been on standby and ready to leave since Friday. Their official mission is to protect the 1,500 Belgian nationals in war-torn Rwanda.

A third aircraft carrying more paratroopers was due to leave at 1700 GMT for Nairobi, an official of the state-owned Belgian airline Sabena said.

Earlier in the day Belgium, the former colonial power, sent seven mil-

itary aircraft to Kigali reportedly loaded mainly with equipment, accompanied by an eighth aircraft from the Netherlands.

Belgian vice-prime minister Elio Di Rupo said on Belgian radio that Belgium was launching an operation to protect Belgian nationals. He would not comment on reports of an imminent evacuation of foreigners from Rwanda.

French troops took control of Kigali airport early Saturday in preparation for the possible evacuation of 3,000 foreign nationals from the turbulent little African country.

A detachment of US marines has already reached the Burundi capital of Bujumbura, about 500 kilometres (300 miles) from Kigali.

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