

First two Belgian military planes head for Africa: spokesman

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BRUSSELS, April 9 (AFP) - The first two Belgian C-130 military planes left Melsbroek military airport near Brussels Saturday to take part in the possible evacuation of foreign residents from bloodshed in Rwanda, a Belgian military spokesman said.

The planes were loaded mostly with equipment, Belgian radio said without specifying what sort.

A spokesman at the military airport would neither confirm or deny the information, but he said that other planes would take off for Africa during the day.

Ten Belgian UN peacekeepers were among thousands of people reportedly killed when Rwanda slid back into civil war this week after its president and his counterpart from neighboring Burundi were killed in a plane crash in Kigali, the Rwandan capital, late Wednesday, though Burundi has remained calm.

The commander of Belgian UN

troops in Kigali, Colonel Luc Marchal, told Belgian radio from Kigali that sporadic fighting continued in the Rwandan capital Saturday morning. UN sources said earlier that fighting had died down after a ceasefire was signed Friday by fighters in Rwanda.

Some 280 French paratroopers landed at Kigali airport Saturday to protect some 600 French citizens in Rwanda, Paris officials said, while about 200 US Marines were to arrive Saturday in the Burundi capital Bujumbura to help with any possible evacuation of foreign residents from Rwanda, the UN envoy in Bujumbura, Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, said.

Two battalions of Belgian paratroopers - about 800 men - were put on alert in Belgium, the former colonial power in Rwanda and Burundi, Friday for possible deployment to help with any evacuation of the estimated 1,500 Belgian nationals in

Rwanda.

Colonel Marchal said in the radio interview that five Transall C-160 French planes had unloaded men and equipment at Kigali airport early Saturday.

"The French mission would involve ensuring security around the entire airport," he said.

But he said one of the main problems before any evacuation was to ensure the security of civilians along the route they must travel from the city to reach the airport.

"One of the main roads between the city and the airport runs through a combat zone, and this has given us problems for two days," he said.

Marchal said for the moment no order had been issued to round up and evacuate foreigners stranded in Rwanda.

Before doing this, they must ensure airport security and a safe evacuation route as "it would not be wise to bring expatriates out onto the streets while shooting continues," he said.

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