

France, Belgium want UN, Africa to tackle Rwanda crisis

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PARIS, April 12 (AFP) - France and Belgium are considering a rapid pull-out of their troops from Rwanda, once foreigners have been evacuated, leaving the UN and African countries to try to restore peace in the east African country.

The evacuation of 600 French nationals from Rwanda was nearly completed Monday and French officials said French paratroopers sent there at the weekend would pull out very quickly, possibly starting on Tuesday.

In Paris, Foreign Ministry deputy spokeswoman Catherine Colonna stressed that the French paratroopers' mission was "purely humanitarian" and aimed only at evacuating foreign nationals.

Meanwhile in Brussels, Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene told a parliamentary committee Monday that his government was considering withdrawing the 450 Belgian UN peacekeeping troops from

Rwanda, where ethnic warfare between the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi tribes has left thousands dead.

Belgium sent the troops to its former colony last year to uphold a peace agreement signed in Arusha, Tanzania, between the Hutu-dominated government and the mainly Tutsi rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).

The Belgian troops have been stationed there, along with Ghanaians and Bangladeshi troops, within the framework of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda ((MINUAR).

Earlier Monday, French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe called for a "re-launch of the process of dialogue" between the warring parties.

Speaking on French radio, Juppe said France would "do its utmost" in cooperation with Rwanda's neighbours, the Organisation of African

Unity (OAU) and the United Nations to find a political solution to the conflict.

On Sunday, French Development Aid Minister Michel Roussin said it was up to "the UN to assume its responsibilities", adding that French forces would not "get mixed up" in the Rwandan fighting.

Belgium Foreign Minister Willy Claes is meet UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in Geneva soon to discuss Belgium's role in peacekeeping forces.

"All will depend on what happens to the Arusha agreements," said Dehaene.

"If the Arusha agreements are abandoned, the problem will have to be addressed by the United Nations itself, because the peacekeeping troops were sent to Rwanda within the framework of the agreements."

"If there is still a will to apply the agreements, we must question the general role of peacekeeping troops and whether our own role in the mission is appropriate," he added.

Claes, for his part, suggested that the current MINUAR mandate was "too limited", adding that the UN should take up the matter.

French officials privately confess it would be too dangerous to leave French troops in Kigali where they might end up being drawn into the fighting.

In the past the RPF has accused

France of siding with Rwandan government forces, notably when it stationed troops in the country between 1990 and 1993.

Belgium, on the other hand, is viewed by the Hutus as pro-Tutsi and believes that too rapid a French withdrawal might leave its own forces exposed, informed sources said.

Ten Belgian soldiers were killed Thursday by the Rwandan presidential guard, and at least three Belgian civilians have been reported killed in the fighting.

Both France and Belgium have also called on the US to use its influence with the RPF and its Ugandan backers.

However observers here doubt whether the UN, which is already heavily engaged in peace-keeping operations elsewhere in the world, has the means for yet another intervention.

"All the more so as there will be fewer and fewer foreign witnesses to bear witness to the tragedy" unfolding in Rwanda, one observer predicted.

As for Africa, it lacks both the political and financial clout to deal with the problem.

"We have created a mechanism for the prevention of conflicts but its principle is stomped by lack of means," Senegalese President Abdou Diouf said here Monday.

"We must be helped by countries

which have the means to do it," he mj/fc/jb/
added.