Last Belgian paratroopers to leave Rwanda Friday

AFP, April 15, 1994

BRUSSELS, April 15 (AFP) - The last of 260 Belgian paratroopers sent to Rwanda to evacuate foreigners fleeing tribal violence are to leave the capital Kigali Friday now that the evacuation is complete, a Belgian Army spokesman said.

Belgium meanwhile officially announced that another 400 Belgians serving in the UN aid mission in Rwanda would also return home. Details of their withdrawal were being discussed with the United Nations, according to a statement published after a Cabinet meeting. No date was given.

Rwandan soldiers killed 10 Belgian peacekeepers last week at the start of the ethnic unrest, when they tried to protect the Rwandan prime minister who was later also executed.

Seventeen flights were scheduled Friday to bring out the 260 paratroopers, and five flights had already left Kigali by noon under an operation dubbed "Silver Back," the army spokesman said.

"We hope to be able to finish up the operation" before the end of the day, he added.

The Belgian Ambassador in Nairobi earlier said the troops had already withdrawn in accordance with an ultimatum by the RPF rebels for foreign troops to leave the country or face attack. The deadline expired at 1000 GMT, he said.

Referring to the Belgian UN contingent, Foreign Minister Willy Claes said Thursday the Belgian peacekeepers would not stay under any circumstances, and that there was no longer any point to the UN mission being there.

Ethnic bloodletting broke out last week after the deaths of the presidents of Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi in a plane crash. The clashes have since claimed thousands of lives.

Meanwhile in Rome, military

sources said 133 Italian soldiers deployed for three days at Kigali airport to evacuate Italians and other foreigners returned to Nairobi at 1100 GMT Friday, having completed their mission.

Most of some 200 Italians in Rwanda were repatriated although a few – notably priests and nuns – elected to remain.

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