

Rwandan rebels, army sign ceasefire as air bridge consolidated

AFP, April 10, 1994

BRUSSELS, April 10 (AFP) - Rwandan rebels and the army Sunday signed a ceasefire agreement which appears to be holding, the commander of Belgian UN troops in the African country said.

"The two sides agreed this morning on a ceasefire and apart from sporadic shots it seems to be holding," Colonel Luc Marchal said in the Rwandan capital Kigali in a live interview with Belgian television.

The report came as the multinational emergency operation to pull thousands of foreigners out of war-torn Rwanda stepped up a gear Sunday, with France and Belgium consolidating an airlift.

Aid workers reported the capital relatively quiet overnight.

The French airborne evacuation of 600 French nationals and other foreigners, which got under way late Saturday, continued Sunday morning with shuttle flights to the Bu-

rundian capital Bujumbura, a foreign ministry spokeswoman in Paris said.

Catherine Colonna said a first flight with 64 French nationals arrived in Burundi Sunday, and other flights would reach the city later in the day.

Meanwhile Belgian planes flown to neighbouring African countries and due to participate in the evacuation of between 1,500 and 2,000 Belgians and other expatriates gained authorisation from Rwandan authorities to land at Kigali airport, a spokesman for the Brussels defence ministry said.

Spokesman Freddy van de Weghe told AFP: "The new government has decided to to allow Belgian planes to land."

He said a Brussels-led airlift could get under way within hours, provided Belgian soldiers already on the ground confirmed it was now safe for the planes to land.

Foreign Minister Willy Claes added that, if necessary, some Belgian nationals could be evacuated on French or US planes.

Early Sunday 4,000 ethnic Tutsi rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which earlier warned against foreign armed intervention on the ground and indicated any airlift should be completed in 12 hours, were reported to advance on Kigali.

But the commander of Belgian UN troops said Sunday afternoon the rebels and the Rwandan army had signed a ceasefire agreement.

Colonel Marchal said that "the intensity of the fighting in recent days has given the impression that it (the combat) is all over."

The rebel troops were to back up a 600-men rebel force already in city, where at least 1,000 people have been killed and thousands wounded in three days of bloodletting between the Tutsis and the majority Hutus.

On Saturday three plane loads of 600 Belgian paratroopers left Brussels to assist in the evacuation, while eight aircraft also left the city laden with heavy equipment which could be used to secure the route to the airport, around 10 kilometres (six miles) outside Kigali.

But the troops were prevented from landing at Kigali airport by Rwandan government forces blocking the runway there to all but French aircraft.

Meanwhile the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) headquarters in Kigali, contacted by phone from Paris, reported relative calm in the Rwandan capital overnight bloodletting.

"There are too many bodies in the streets, so the ICRC is giving priority to the wounded, to those still alive," an ICRC spokesman said.

In Oman, French Defence Minister Francois Leotard stressed that his troops had not been deployed in Rwanda "to wage war," but to carry out a "pinpoint" evacuation operation.

Leotard told AFP Sunday during an official visit to the Gulf state that France was, if necessary, prepared to evacuate all foreigners in Rwanda by air, adding that French troops on the ground had thus far not come under attack.

In New York, the Front's envoy Claude Dusaidi earlier said rebel forces would attack any foreign troops who stayed behind after evacuating their nationals. He said the evacuation should take no longer than 12 hours.

Also in New York, the United Nations Security Council authorised all necessary steps to protect the 2,500 UN troops in Rwanda, where they were sent to monitor a peace accord signed last August between the government and the rebels.

Meanwhile in Bonn, officials said

a 200-seat German army plane had taken off Sunday for Bujumbura to airlift out German nationals and other foreigners who have fled Rwanda by road.

In New Delhi, the government Sunday asked Indians in Rwanda to be ready for "immediate evacuation," while US authorities earlier said about 330 marines had been flown to Bujumbura to help evacuate 255 Americans from Kigali.

Road convoys of about 400 Americans and Europeans left Kigali and southern Rwanda Saturday for Bu-

rundi.

UN agencies were planning to evacuate more civilian personnel from Kigali Sunday after about 100 staff left for Burundi by road.

The bloodletting was sparked by the deaths Wednesday in a plane crash of Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana and his Burundian counterpart Cyprien Ntaryamira, both Hutus. The Rwandan foreign ministry said the plane had been shot down.

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