

Thousands massacred in Rwanda

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Thousands of bodies were seen lying in the streets of Kigali, the Rwandan capital, yesterday after a two-day orgy of violence and looting following the deaths of the presidents of Rwanda and the neighbouring republic of Burundi.

The Belgian government was leading attempts to assemble an international force to go to its former colony, where the commander of a Belgian UN peacekeeping contingent said last night a ceasefire was being negotiated.

The president of the UN Security Council, Colin Keating, reporting an improvement in the situation, said early today an agreement had been reached on a ceasefire. He added that various factions had agreed on the appointment of an interim government, and had chosen a president, prime minister and five ministers.

But it appeared that the priority of any foreign operation would be to airlift foreigners, not to disarm forces which have been using weapons ranging from machetes to artillery.

The US, whose ambassador's residence is under attack, ordered Americans to leave Rwanda and made plans for an evacuation, the US deputy assistant secretary of state, Prudence Bushnell, told a State Department news briefing. And Canada will send a military transport plane to evacuate about

200 Canadian citizens, foreign ministry officials said.

An International Red Cross official who saw the bodies littering the streets also reported finding about 350 bodies at the central hospital and the Vatican ambassador in Kigali said that at least 25 Rwandan priests and nuns have been murdered.

In one incident, soldiers entered a religious centre, locked six priests and nine novice nuns in a room and then killed them. Two Belgian Jesuits were spared.

Belgium was talking to France, the US and the UN about a joint military operation to take and hold Kigali airport.

Belgian paratroops were standing by and 8,000 French troops in the Central African Republic were on alert. At least 10 Belgian UN soldiers were killed by the rebel forces on Thursday after the aircraft carrying the Rwandan and Burundian leaders back from peace talks was brought down by unknown assailants.

A French serviceman and his wife, among several hundred French nationals in Kigali, have also been killed, Radio France Internationale reported.

As Rwandan soldiers pursued their mission of vengeance for what they regard as Wednesday's assassination of President Juvenal Habyarimana, the

dead were also found in people's gardens, according to the chief delegate to the International Committee of the Red Cross, Philippe Gaillard, who was able to tour some of the city.

'Many others have been wounded, but the hospital can't cope,' he said. 'Only one surgeon is working. There are already 350 bodies in the hospital morgue.'

Another eyewitness spoke of people dumping bodies outside the hospital morgue.

Mr Gaillard said the soldiers roaming Kigali's streets and setting up roadblocks were respecting the emblem of the Red Cross and allowing teams to move around the city.

Aid agencies reported that refugees were beginning to flee into neighbouring countries after dozens of reports of atrocities, many attributed to the presidential guard, but some allegedly committed by bands of lawless armed youths.

It is not clear why religious communities are being targeted. Soldiers who belong to the late President Habyarimana's majority Hutu tribe have been going from house to house kidnapping and killing minority Tutsis, but the priests and nuns were said to be of both

tribes.

Nor is it clear who is a Hutu and who is a Tutsi. A Rwandan journalist, Nestor Serushago, described how youths armed with knives attacked a young couple with a baby, because, although they were Hutus, they looked like Tutsis.

People who support political parties which opposed the late president are also being targeted. A local aid-worker said three members of her family who supported the opposition Liberal Party were taken from their homes and killed.

A spokesman for the UN peace-keeping force in Kigali said the fighting had been between members of the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front and troops of the presidential guard.

However, other sources said that the three sections of the security forces - the gendarmes, the army and the presidential guard - had also been fighting among themselves.

As dusk fell, military chiefs and the few politicians who had not gone into hiding or been killed were still in a meeting. They were reported to be trying to establish a crisis committee to run the country and restore law and order.