

West scrambles to quit chaotic Rwanda

Graham Brown

AFP, April 9, 1994

BRUSSELS, April 9 (AFP) - Belgium, France, the United States and other countries scrambled Saturday to organise the evacuation of up to 4,000 (eds: correct) foreigners from Rwanda before it is engulfed in civil war.

As rebel forces marched towards Kigali for a showdown with government troops, French and Belgian troops were holding the airport as France began the evacuation of about 600 French nationals.

French government officials said the first of several evacuation flights had left Kigali Saturday evening. Some 280 French troops arrived from the Central African Republic early Saturday. Another 120 arrived later in the day.

Earlier, the first contingents of 800 Belgian paratroopers flew out of Brussels in two aircraft to secure the evacuation of around 2,000 (eds: correct) Belgian nationals. Belgium is the former colonial power of Rwanda.

But Belgian Defence Ministry

spokesman Freddy Van Deweghe said Rwandan armed forces, fired up by anti-Belgian propaganda, were blocking the runway of Kigali airport to all but French aircraft.

Officials at Bujumbura airport in neighbouring Burundi said they were expecting the Belgian aircraft to land there, but Belgian authorities would give no information.

Earlier Saturday, a road convoy of about 200 Americans left Kigali for neighbouring Burundi.

In Bonn, the German foreign ministry said around 100 German nationals arrived in the Burundian capital Bujumbura Saturday afternoon, after fleeing southern Rwanda by road.

The US authorities said about 330 US marines had been flown from Mombasa to Bujumbura in Burundi, backed by helicopters and transport planes, to assist the evacuation of 255 Americans from Kigali, mainly missionaries and aid workers.

The Italian Defence Ministry said it was sending three aircraft and 80

troops to Nairobi to support the evacuation effort. The Swiss government urged Swiss nationals in Rwanda, numbering nearly 200, to leave.

In Vienna, the Austrian Foreign Ministry said it had asked France, Belgium and Germany to evacuate 15 Austrians living in Kigali.

Fuelling the rush to leave Rwanda was a warning from the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) that foreign troops should not interfere in the looming civil war beyond helping to evacuate foreign nationals.

RPF spokesman Claude Dusaidi said at the United Nations in New York that the movement's forces would attack any foreign forces remaining in Rwanda after the evacuation of foreigners.

Van Deweghe said hardline elements of the Rwandan government were spreading an anti-Belgian hate campaign, which may have contributed to the slaying of 10 Belgian members of a UN contingent in Rwanda on Thursday.

He said the Rwandan Hutu authorities supported the French presence because France, unlike Belgium, had not withdrawn its troops during a large-scale offensive of rebel Tutsis in 1990.

"There is a hardline minority element trying to make the public believe that the Belgians are the bad guys," he said, adding that this element had blamed Belgium for the

deaths of the Rwandan and Burundi presidents last week.

The bloodshed in Rwanda was triggered on Wednesday when presidents Juvenal Habyarimana of Rwanda and Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi were killed with 10 others. Their aircraft crashed in Kigali, reportedly after being shot down.

The Belgian television channel RTBF said Rwandan radio stations were broadcasting allegations that Belgian UN peacekeepers were responsible for shooting down the aircraft.

The channel reported that Belgians trying to flee Rwanda had been threatened and molested.

The ten Belgian victims were slain Thursday after unsuccessfully trying to stop the murder of Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyamana by troops of the presidential guard – hard-line supporters of Hutu President Habyarimana.

Van Deweghe said fighting between government troops and the RPF was continuing on Saturday, including on the road to the airport, making it impossible to assemble large numbers of foreign nationals at evacuation points.

The airport is about 10 kilometres (six miles) from Kigali city centre. Earlier Saturday, eight aircraft left Brussels laden with heavy equipment which could be used to secure this route to the airport.

According to information available, foreigners in Rwanda number 2,000 Belgians, 600 French, 350 Germans, 255 Americans, 200 Canadians, 198 Italians, 175 Swiss, 135 Spaniards, plus 100 Britons and 100 Dutch.

gb/mt