

Western troops headed for Kigali after French secure airport

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PARIS, April 9 (AFP) - Belgian and US troops headed for war-torn Rwanda on Saturday to protect and possibly evacuate westerners stranded there after French forces arrived to secure Kigali airport.

Some 200 US Marines were due Saturday morning in the Burundi capital to help with any possible evacuation of foreign residents from strife-torn neighboring Rwanda, a UN envoy said in Bujumbura.

And the first two Belgian C-130 military planes left Melsbroek military airport near Brussels Saturday to take part in the possible evacuation of foreign residents from bloodshed in Rwanda, a Belgian military spokesman said.

In New York, New Zealand's UN Ambasssador Colin Keating, the current Security Council chief, said fighters in Rwanda had agreed on a ceasefire and formed a transitional government headed by Theodore Sindikub-

wabo, a former speaker of the national assembly.

But the former rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front had not responded to an offer to join the interim government, to be formed by members of the party of Rwanda's president Juvenal Habyiramana killed in a plane crash on Wednesday, and four opposition parties.

"The ceasefire did not take hold immediately, but by all accounts the level of fighting has diminished significantly," according to a UN statement.

But an AFP correspondent in Kigali said that sporadic firing could still be heard on Saturday.

The commander of Belgian UN troops in Kigali, Colonel Luc Marchal, also told Belgian radio from Kigali that sporadic fighting continued in the Rwandan capital Saturday morning.

The ceasefire went into effect Fri-

day at 4:00 p.m. (1400 GMT).

Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, the UN special representative in Bujumbura, said the US Marines' mission would be strictly humanitarian.

The American soldiers were to arrive on board four or five planes, including two C-130 transport aircraft, supply planes and two or three helicopters, according to the envoy. He did not give other details or say from where the US troops were flying in.

Washington asked Burundi authorities late Friday for permission to land troops in the capital Bujumbura, he said.

It was given the go-ahead by the special interim committee set up to govern following the deaths of Habyarimana and Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira, in a plane crash in Kigali late Wednesday that touched off the latest inter-ethnic fighting between the dominant Hutus and minority Tutsi.

The plane was reportedly shot down.

Though both countries have a history of ethnic trouble, Burundi has remained calm unlike Rwanda where thousands have been killed – including the Rwandan prime minister and 10 UN peacekeepers from Belgium, the two countries' former colonial power, – in the trouble that erupted

after the plane crash.

Marchal said in the radio interview that five Transall C-160 French planes had unloaded men and equipment at Kigali airport early Saturday.

"The French mission would involve ensuring security around the entire airport," he said.

But he said one of the main problems before any evacuation was to ensure the security of civilians along the route they must travel from the city to reach the airport.

France which along with Belgium coordinates the Rwanda operation landed 280 paratroopers flown in from Central Africa at the airport in Kigali Saturday to protect French citizens.

Foreign and defense ministry officials in Paris said the soldiers were sent in to "ensure security" for a possible evacuation of French citizens.

Belgian radio said the two planes that left Melsbroek military base early Saturday were loaded mostly with equipment.

A spokesman at Melsbroek would neither confirm or deny the information, but he said that other planes would take off for Africa during the day.

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