

Belgium, France consider Rwanda evacuation

Nicholas Doughty

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BRUSSELS, April 8 (Reuter) - Belgium put paratroops on alert to evacuate foreigners from its former African colony of Rwanda on Friday, after 10 Belgian soldiers were killed trying in vain to protect the country's prime minister.

France was considering using troops stationed in the Central African Republic to evacuate its 600 nationals from Rwanda, where violence has flared again following the assassination of the president earlier this week, military sources in Paris said.

The Belgian government scheduled an emergency cabinet meeting for later on Friday to decide whether to evacuate some 1,500 Belgians and perhaps other foreigners.

The Rwandan capital, Kigali, has been plunged into an orgy of violence and looting following the deaths of the presidents of Burundi and Rwanda on Wednesday.

Rwanda, one of the smallest and poorest African states, has suffered from a civil war along tribal lines for

four years.

"We lost some 10 peacekeepers in Kigali on Thursday, which was a tragic night for us," Belgian Foreign Minister Willy Claes told reporters before he cut short a visit to Romania.

Government sources said two battalions of paratroops - some 800 men - had been put on alert for a possible evacuation, which could be carried out in cooperation with French forces.

"They are ready to go when and if we decide they should," said one source who asked not to be identified.

France has already put its 8,600 soldiers at bases spread throughout central and western Africa on alert.

Belgium, which built up a huge empire in central Africa in the 19th century, has often sent paratroops to restore order or rescue its nationals since it gave up colonies such as Zaire and Rwanda. Rwanda became independent in 1962.

A government statement issued after a late night cabinet meeting on

Thursday said ministers had “analysed the present dramatic situation in Rwanda, particularly with a view to taking appropriate measures for the protection of our compatriots”.

Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene cut short a holiday in Malta to return to Brussels on Friday.

Extra troops would have to be sent for any rescue mission because a 2,500-strong U.N. force in Rwanda has no mandate to protect or evacuate foreign nationals.

The Belgian armed forces said in a statement that the 10 dead soldiers, part of the U.N. force, were disarmed and executed by Rwandan troops at a military camp in Kigali on Thursday.

“These Belgian soldiers were in charge of the security of Prime Minister Agathe Unilingyimana, whose residence was surrounded by Rwandan soldiers. She tried to flee. Our soldiers

were apprehended while they were covering her flight,” it said.

The prime minister was also killed by soldiers.

The commander of the Belgian peacekeepers in Rwanda, Colonel Luc Marchal, told Belgian radio the bodies of the dead soldiers were in a Kigali hospital and that they would be flown home.

Violence swept Kigali following the deaths of presidents Juvenal Habyarimana of Rwanda and Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi in a rocket attack on their plane as it flew into the city on Wednesday night. It is not clear who was responsible.

Belgium expressed outrage at the deaths of the two presidents and warned that the killings could destabilise both countries, bedevilled by violent tribal rivalries for decades.

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