

Belgian paras arrive in Rwanda to evacuate Westerners

Morrison, Jane

Reuters, April 10, 1994

BRUSSELS, April 10 (Reuter) - Belgian paratroops flew into the violence-torn Rwandan capital of Kigali on Sunday as part of an international force to evacuate Belgians and other expatriates.

Belgian armed forces chief-of-staff Lieutenant-General Jose Charlier said eight C-130 transport planes carrying 250 troops landed at Kigali airport as part of Operation Silver Back, a reference to Rwanda's famous mountain gorillas.

"The second phase of the operation is complete, now the third phase is starting to evacuate people," Charlier said.

Tens of thousands of people have died in Rwanda in an orgy of fighting and ethnic violence since the Rwandan president was assassinated last week. About 1,500 Belgian citizens live there, forming the biggest single contingent of Westerners.

Defence Minister Leo Delcroix said the paratroops would take part only in the evacuation plan. "I hope it will be finished within a few days, but I do not know exactly how long it will take," he said.

He said there would be no problem evacuating Belgians from Kigali but the operation could be more difficult in the rest of the country.

Charlier told a news conference that evacuations started on Sunday morning, led by French troops and helped by Belgian troops already in Kigali as part of a U.N. force.

He said it had been agreed that French troops would fly into Rwanda first because they had men on the spot in Africa and good relations with the Rwandan army.

Rwandan authorities agreed to open the airport to the Belgian troops on Sunday afternoon after all-night negotiations, he said.

Aircraft with troops and heavy equipment left Brussels on Saturday but were forced to go to Djibouti and Kenya because Rwandan government forces at Kigali airport blocked the runway and refused to let them land.

The Belgians are unpopular among the majority Hutu tribe which believes they support the rebels. There were also rumours in Kigali that Belgium was involved in the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana.

Foreign Minister Willy Claes, speaking earlier on Belgian television, denied both charges.

Claes said Belgium, the former colonial power, had no intention of intervening with force and wanted only to mount a rescue operation with France and the United States, which has sent more than 300 Marines to neighbouring Burundi.

“This is a short-term humanitarian mission,” he said. “Those who wish to stay can do so but it is at their own risk.”

The first Belgian plane returning with expatriates from Rwanda was due to arrive in Brussels at 0200 GMT Monday, Belgian national airline Sabena said.

The bodies of 10 Belgian soldiers killed last Thursday while trying in vain to protect slain Rwandan Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingyimana were flown to the Kenyan capital Nairobi. Four wounded soldiers were also on the plane, witnesses said.

The foreign affairs ministry said three Belgian civilians were also killed in Kigali.

(c) Reuters Limited 1994