

Belgium starts risky Rwanda evacuation

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BRUSSELS, April 11 (Reuter) - Belgium started a high-risk evacuation of its nationals from Rwanda on Monday as rebels were reported to be closing in on the capital Kigali.

Top Rwandan rebel leaders said two of their battalions were nearing Kigali in a move they said was to restore order in the city awash in tribal bloodshed.

"We estimate that about 300 Belgians have already been evacuated," Colonel Freddy Van Den Weghe, spokesman for Belgium's armed forces, told a news conference in Brussels.

Most of the Belgians were airlifted from Kigali to Nairobi, Kenya, in Belgian military C-130 planes with 20 others on a Canadian plane, he said.

Belgian airline Sabena has sent three planes to Nairobi at the request of the Belgian government, Sabena spokeswoman Pascale Zoetaert said. The three planes, including a Boeing 747, can evacuate up to 800 people, she said.

The first plane is due to return in Brussels around 2300 GMT, Zoetaert said.

Van Den Weghe said the situation remained tense and difficult in the former Belgian colony. He said it was still unclear whether Belgians could be evacuated from areas outside Kigali.

Belgian BRTN radio correspondent Katrien Van der Schoot told the radio from Kigali she had been told by the Belgian embassy that the evacuation from the city was running smoothly and was nearly completed.

Earlier, the commander of Belgian troops serving as part of a 2,500-strong U.N. force in Rwanda said there was still firing in parts of the capital but the fighting was less intense than in previous days.

"Police are trying to get security under control and are rooting out looters," Colonel Luc Marchal told Belgian radio.

Paratroops were flown into Kigali on Sunday as part of an international effort to evacuate Belgians and other expatriates after an orgy of violence in the capital.

Tens of thousands of people have died following the assassination of the country's president last week.

Van Den Weghe said there were 400 Belgian paratroops in Kigali. He said French troops also in the city would help evacuate Belgians. "It's a coordinated operation. It is clear that some (French troops) will stay," he said.

Some 90 Belgians - there are 1,500 in the former colony, the biggest contingent of Westerners - arrived in Brussels early on Monday on a flight from

neighbouring Burundi. They had escaped in an overland convoy from southern Rwanda.

Belgian Defence Minister Leo Delcroix warned on Sunday of the dangers in the evacuation and said it could take more than a week.

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. Belgium has denied both charges.

But Rwanda's ambassador to Belgium denied that there were anti-Belgian feelings among Rwanda's population.

In a statement to the Belga news agency, Francois Ngarukiyintwali said certain media "were cultivating the thesis of an antagonist anti-Belgian sentiment.

"...This is a deliberate provocation which could precisely stir this kind of sentiment," he said.

Belgian Foreign Minister Willy Claes said earlier that six Belgian civilians have been killed in Rwanda since ethnic violence erupted in the former Belgian colony last week.

The latest toll brings to 16 the number of Belgians killed in Rwanda.

Ten Belgian paratroops were killed last Thursday while trying in vain to protect Rwandan Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingyimana, who was later killed.

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