

Belgium mourns Rwanda dead as last evacuees return

Reuters, April 14, 1994

BRUSSELS, April 14 (Reuter) - Belgium started two days of mourning on Thursday for 16 of its nationals killed in Rwanda as the evacuation of Belgians from its former colony neared an end.

Belgium has also decided to withdraw some 400 troops serving with 2,500-strong U.N. force in Rwanda.

Defence Minister Leo Delcroix said on Belgian radio the troops could take several weeks to leave. Paratroopers sent to evacuate nationals are expected to leave within a few days.

"We're in Rwanda with quite a bit of materiel. As a result it will take a few days at least to get the logistic operation behind us, and for the whole (withdrawal) perhaps a few weeks," Delcroix told Belgian BRTN radio.

United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said on Wednesday he had called for plans to be drawn up for a possible withdrawal of the U.N. force in Rwanda in the light of a decision by Belgium to pull out its 440-man contingent.

The Belgian government said flags would fly at half mast from Thursday to midday Saturday.

A military honours ceremony was attended by King Albert and government members to pay homage to 10 Belgian paratroops killed in Kigali last week as an orgy of bloodletting swept the capital following the death of the president.

The country's barracks will observe a minute of silence for the dead soldiers, who were killed trying in vain to protect the Rwandan prime minister. Six Belgian civilians were also killed in the violence.

The Belgian daily De Standaard described the withdrawal from Rwanda as "Belgium's Saigon," referring to the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975. There were an estimated 1,500 Belgians in Rwanda, forming the largest group of Westerners.

An army spokesman said there were practically no more Belgian civilians left in Rwanda but paratroops were still searching for any few remaining Westerners outside the capital.

Le Soir described how six Belgians and two Dutch were evacuated by Belgian paratroops from a mental hospital outside Kigali where they had taken refuge with hundreds of peasants, wounded and mentally ill patients.

“Soldiers have been firing on the building since last Thursday. We have nothing to eat, there are wounded and dead people. We are living with the insane and there is no medicine,” Le Soir quoted one of the Rwandan refugees as saying.

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