Mourning ceremony, adds background

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BRUSSELS, April 14 (AFP) - Belgium announced Thursday that it was withdrawing its last peacekeepers from Rwanda and began three days of official mourning for 10 Belgian soldiers murdered during ethnic clashes in the former colony.

Foreign Minister Willy Claes said the 450 Belgian peacekeepers would be withdrawn as soon as possible from Rwanda, a Belgian colony until independence in 1962.

Citing a "virulent" anti-Belgian mood in Rwanda, he said the troops would not remain there "under any circumstances," no matter what the UN Security Council decided to do during a meeting on the future of the UN peacekeeping force in the country later Thursday.

"We have decided to withdraw the Belgian troops from the UN contingent. Their peace-keeping mission no longer makes sense," Claes told a press conference. "We believe the Security Council would show great wisdom if it decided to suspend its peacekeeping mission."

"I don't consider (the withdrawal) a humiliation but a logical development and (showing) a sense of responsibility," he said.

French Defence Minister Francois Leotard also announced in Paris Thursday that the 500 French paratroopers sent in to Rwanda last week to evacuate foreign nationals would all be pulled out of the country by late Thursday.

King Albert II and seven government ministers meanwhile led the commemoration ceremony at the military hospital of Neder-over-Heembeek near Brussels, which was transmitted live on Belgian television.

"We have come to say goodbye to our 10 assassinated comrades, who were unable to defend themselves. That is sad and terrible," said a former parachute regiment soldier who had taken part in other UN missions.

The soldiers, serving in the UN Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UN-

AMR), were slaughtered by the presidential guard in Kigali on April 7 after trying unsuccessfully to stop the murder of Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingyamana.

Six Belgian civilians were also killed in the conflict between majority Hutus and minority Tutsis sparked by the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana in a plane crash last Wednesday, reportedly after being hit by a rocket.

The ethnic slaughter has left tens of thousands of people dead.

Altogether the United Nations has about 2,300 soldiers and 300 observers in Rwanda from 23 countries. Nearly 1,000 are from Bangladesh and 840 from Ghana.

Belgian troops and civilians became the targets of a hate campaign by Hutu extremists during the last week of ethnic carnage in Rwanda because of Brussels' perceived tradition of backing the Tutsi's, who allied with the ruling power during the colonial period.

Belgium was specifically accused by members of the interim government and its Hutu supporters of supporting the rebel, mainly Tutsi, Rwandan Patriotic Front.

Radio stations also accused the Belgians of shooting down Habyarimana's aircraft. Belgian nationals were vilified and harassed.

The Belgian foreign minister said that the UN force had been powerless to stop the massacres in Rwanda and the situation was becoming increasingly chaotic.

But he said the pull-out of the Belgian peacekeepers did not mean that Belgium was abandoning Rwanda, or giving up participation in other UN missions such as in Somalia or Yugoslavia.

Brussels will continue to supply humanitarian aid to Rwanda, which along with Burundi is one of the biggest beneficiaries of Belgian aid, he said.

"I don't think we're showing a lack of solidarity with Rwanda .... A little country like Belgium makes a big effort but there are limits," he said.

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