

Belgium prepares to evacuate from former colony

AFP, April 8, 1994

BRUSSELS, April 8 (AFP) - Senior Belgian cabinet ministers met in crisis session Friday to prepare for a possible evacuation of Belgian nationals from Rwanda amid mounting criticism of Belgium's military role in world trouble-spots.

Belgium's military associations and trade unions were particularly angered by the slaying Thursday of 10 members of the Belgian contingent to a UN assistance mission in Rwanda.

They issued angry statements saying that Belgian soldiers were not "cannon-fodder" to be sent, unarmed, to distant lands in defence of international interests that had little general support in Belgium.

The Belgian government ordered a Boeing 737 to Bujumbura in Burundi, and a DC-10 aircraft to Entebbe in Uganda in preparation for an airlift of the 1,500 Belgians in Rwanda as the tiny landlocked African country sinks into civil war.

But evacuations could only take place if a safety zone with a 20-kilometre radius was secured around Kigali airport, said Communications Minister Elio Di Rupo.

A government spokesman said two Belgian paratroop battalions numbering about 800 men had been placed on the alert ready to leave for the little central African country at a moment's notice.

Reflecting the public anguish at the chaos engulfing the former Belgian colony, *Le Soir*, one of Belgium's largest newspapers, said Friday: "Horror. There is no other word to describe the situation reigning in Rwanda."

The 10 slain Belgian soldiers, aged between 25 and 32, were executed for trying to defend Rwandan Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, from the minority Tutsi tribe, who was killed by Rwanda's presidential guard drawn from the predomi-

nant Hutus.

Their colonel, Luc Marchal, said the 10 soldiers had been beaten before being killed. Between them, they left five children and one unborn baby.

The Free Union of the Public Service issued a statement saying the Belgian troops died for a cause "which is not directly theirs and for which there is little regard in Belgium."

The General Centre for the Public Service representing military personnel said the men had been poorly prepared for a situation becoming increasingly dangerous.

"We hope the politicians as well as the public are aware that the military man is a human being and not cannon-fodder that can be used anywhere in the world," it said.

The General Centre for Military Personnel called for a period of national mourning, and accused

the government of ignoring repeated warnings from the military about the dangers of participating in UN peace-keeping missions.

A total of 18 Belgian soldiers have now been killed in less than two years during United Nations operations – 10 in Rwanda, one in Croatia, another in Bosnia-Herzegovina and six in Somalia.

International aid agencies were seeking to evacuate their personnel from Kigali on Friday, said Doctor Georges Dallemagne, director of the Belgian aid organisation *Médecins sans Frontières*.

He said such agencies as MSF, Oxfam, UNICEF and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees were trying to get their officials out of Kigali and also the southern Rwandan town of Butare where ethnic clashes appeared imminent.

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