

Belgium prepares to evacuate from former colony (with added comment by government official)

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BRUSSELS, April 8 (AFP) - The Belgian government said here Friday that it had agreed on action to guarantee the security of Belgian nationals in Rwanda, where ethnic conflict is escalating towards civil war.

The announcement came in a communique issued after a four-hour crisis meeting of senior cabinet ministers chaired by Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene.

Government officials said the meeting had instructed the Belgian military to draw up plans for a military evacuation of the approximately 1,500 Belgian nationals in the tiny east African state.

One official said the Belgian military had the "necessary tools" to prepare an evacuation.

He did not rule out a joint effort involving other countries. Belgium, France, Britain and the United

States were all reported to be in contact with each other on Friday to discuss the evacuation option.

Deputy Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo said in a television interview: "The measures taken by the government will be put into effect in the coming hours and coming days."

He would not elaborate. "The government is acting, but it is acting with discretion. Any excessive announcement will harm the security of our countrymen," the minister said.

Earlier Friday, two Belgian paratroop battalions of 800 men were placed on alert ready to leave for Rwanda at a moment's notice.

Di Rupo had said earlier in the day that two aircraft were ready to leave for the region, but warned that any evacuations could take place only if a safety zone with a 20-kilometre (12-mile) radius was secured around

Kigali airport.

In Friday's communique, the government urged the United Nations to urgently step up the security of UN personnel in Rwanda, and said UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali "fully shares this preoccupation."

It expressed its "indignation" at the slaying of 10 Belgian members of the UN Assistance Force in Rwanda on Thursday after they tried unsuccessfully to prevent the murder of Rwandan prime minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana.

The communique said: "The government is extremely concerned at the deterioration of the situation on the ground, and particularly threats (to the safety) of our countrymen.

"It has therefore decided on measures to guarantee the security of Belgian nationals," the communique added.

The government said a crisis centre had been set up at the Belgian foreign ministry for people with relatives or friends in Rwanda.

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