

Scientists working with gorillas to evacuate Rwanda

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DENVER, April 8 (Reuter) - A British veterinarian and others who care for mountain gorillas in strife-torn Rwanda must abandon their posts, leaving the endangered animals to the mercy of poachers, an official at the Morris Animal Foundation said Friday.

"It's a potential tragedy for the rest of the world," Robert Hilsenroth, executive director of the foundation said.

He said the decision was made Friday to abandon a clinic and a research centre after the American Embassy ordered the evacuation of U.S. nationals.

Red Cross officials in the capital Kigali of the former Belgian colony reported the central hospital overflowing and said the death toll in the bloodbath, which has raged since the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi died in a suspicious plane crash Thursday, could run into thousands.

The clinic at the Volcanoes National Park and a research centre are under the auspices of the foundation and an affiliate group, the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund. Both are headquartered in nearby Englewood, Colorado.

The groups support research and medical programmes at the park and the Karisoke Research Centre. Fossey, a scientist who devoted herself to studying and saving gorillas in Rwanda, was murdered in 1985.

There are only 651 of the majestic apes worldwide, 331 of them in Rwanda, 50 miles (80 km) north of the capital city Kigali where civil war is raging. The remaining 320 gorillas live in impenetrable forest in Uganda, he said.

But he said "Scientists tell us you need 1,000 of a mammalian species" to ensure survivability.

While demand for gorilla hands and other gruesome souvenirs has virtually vanished, the gorillas are still threatened by poachers who set traps for smaller animals.

Dr John Cooper, the clinic's British director, provides medical care for the animals along with his wife Margaret. Four other scientists - one British, one Canadian and two Americans - do behavioural research at the centre. All are leaving their posts, Hilsenroth said.

Hilsenroth said the research work can be put on hold, but the concern was that the animals will not receive medical care.

“In 1985 when Dian Fossey was killed, there were 270 in the park, and now there are 331. So we feel our presence has helped,” he said.

The work will be left in the hands of 36 Rwandans, Hirszenroth said, including a local who earned a masters degree in park management at Colorado State University. But the Rwandans, who in February 1993 left the park to join their families during an outbreak of violence, may have to flee again.

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