

Mountain gorillas threatened by Rwanda war

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NAIROBI, April 11 (Reuter) - The world's last mountain gorillas, made famous by the late Dian Fossey, are in grave danger in Rwanda where a bloody tribal war is raging, a U.S. scientist evacuated from the area said on Monday.

Gorilla researcher Amy Bevis arrived in Nairobi from Rwanda sobbing for the plight of the primates she left behind.

"The gorillas are in grave danger. If the war goes on, they will be in plenty of trouble," Bevis told Reuters on arrival at Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta international airport.

The 25-year-old U.S. researcher was among 150 westerners evacuated from Kigali where rebel forces are said to be within 10 kms (six miles) of the Rwandan capital.

Bevis, from Colorado, said she abandoned her gorillas in the northern Rwandan town of Ruhengeri on Friday after fighting broke out near the town between government forces and rebels of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF).

She travelled overland to the Zairean border from where she and other foreigners were taken to the Burundi capital Bujumbura.

Bevis said the escalating war threatened the survival of the gorillas, who featured in the hit Hollywood film "Gorillas in the Mist".

She said Rwandans trying to escape the bloody tribal violence elsewhere in Rwanda were fleeing to the mountains where the gorillas live.

There are only 651 of the majestic apes worldwide, 321 of them in the mountains of Rwanda 50 miles (80 km) north of the capital Kigali.

The remaining 320 gorillas live in the impenetrable forest in Uganda.

Last week, a clinic run by western veterinarians who care for the mountain gorillas was abandoned in Rwanda after their governments ordered an evacuation, leaving the endangered animals at the mercy of poachers.

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, Bevis said.

"If the gorillas get caught in traps, no one will help," she said describing her Rwandan experience as the "worst in my life."

And with the closure of the clinic in rural Rwanda, the animals will not be able to receive medical treatment.

Fighting in the central African country has raged since President Juvenal Habyarimana died in a plane crash on Wednesday believed to have been caused

by rocket attacks.

Fossey, a U.S. scientist who devoted herself to studying and saving gorillas in Rwanda, was murdered in 1985.

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