

Foreigners begin exodus from Rwanda

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BUTARE, Rwanda, April 9 (AFP) - Foreigners living in Rwanda are in two minds about how to react to the wave of violence which has swept the country in the last few days.

"We have a heavy heart - we love the country but fear is making us leave," said Aouni Abdel, a Belgian who has joined the exodus of foreigners from Rwanda after ethnic clashes which have left at least 1,000 dead.

Around 200 Europeans - mostly Belgians, Germans, Swiss, Dutch and some French - joined a convoy of private cars Saturday on the road from the southern town of Butare to neighbouring Burundi.

They were soon followed by a trail of Americans from the capital Kigali, with another two convoys expected to complete the evacuation of the 200 or so US citizens there.

From the Burundi capital Bujumbura the evacuees will fly back to their respective countries, with many hoping to return when calm returned.

"It's very bad in Kigali. They're still shooting and looting everywhere," commented an American official, who said the US embassy there was now closed.

The first convoy to cross the border included the four members of the Belgian Red Cross in Bugesera, a small town 100 kilometres (60 miles) south-west of Kigali where clashes between the warring Hutu and Tutsi tribes had spread from the capital.

"People are looting everything, they're attacking each other with machetes," declared a frightened-looking Christine Deryck, who said she had seen around 40 dead in the streets of Bugesera.

Belgium, the country's former colonial power, has taken the lead in organising the evacuation of its citizens following the killing of Belgian peacekeeping soldiers.

Thousands - including Rwanda's prime minister - have been killed in the ethnic warfare that erupted in Kigali after the Rwandan and Burundi

presidents were killed in a plane crash there late Wednesday after their craft was reportedly shot down.

One of the French evacuees, working at the Butare cultural centre, said many other French citizens were staying put for the time being.

"We were advised to stay in our homes and prepare a suitcase for departure, which would be soon," said Jacques Vinerbi, aged 26. Things were still calm in Butare but the situation was "unpredictable" and "as whites, who are considered wealthy, anything can happen to us," he said.

The Americans, escorted by police, had to bargain their way through Rwandan army barricades on their way out of Kigali "but we didn't have any problems with them," said one US evacuee.

Since Friday many foreign aid workers based at refugee camps along the southern border have joined the exodus, sparking fears among local Rwandans that the abandoned refugees might get involved in the fighting.

"There are 300,000 refugees here, who's going to look after them, give them something to eat," said one Butare inhabitant.

The landlord of the Hotel Ibis lamented the trail of cars heading for Bujumbura. The man, of Belgian origin, had lived in Rwanda for 56 years and had "seen many other crises."

"But this one is the worst. So many people were never killed (before)," he said sadly.

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