

Gorillas at threat in Rwanda's civil war

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PARIS, March 10 (AFP) - The ugly civil war raging in Rwanda is threatening the survival of the country's famed mountain gorillas after Western scientists studying them were forced to flee, leaving the primates at the mercy of poachers or crossfire, the British weekly *New Scientist* reported.

The magazine said five British, American and German researchers had been evacuated last month from the Karisoke Research Centre in Rwanda's Parc National des Volcans on the border with Uganda. They were forced to leave because of an upsurge in the war between the government and the "invading" Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).

Karisoke station set up in 1967 by the American primatologist Dian Fossey, who was murdered in 1985, was abandoned and later looted by armed militias, although most of the valuable equipment had been saved, the report said.

"The foreign researchers left the

station on 13 February, taking most of the important scientific records and valuable equipment with them. The Rwandan staff fled when the station was overrun and ransacked by soldiers wearing Ugandan uniforms."

The last of the foreign scientists had left Rwanda last week, the magazine said.

Sandy Harcourt, an anthropologist who worked at Karisoke from 1971 to 1983, was quoted as saying that "all sides in the conflict had recognised the scientific importance of the research and the importance of the gorillas to the economy of Rwanda."

She called the closure of Krarisoke, a "scientific tragedy."

The *New Scientist* said "the closure has also meant an end to anti-poaching patrols," raising fears that "poaching will increase."

The scientists were "also worried about the effect the sound of automatic gunfire might have on the gorillas," it added.

An RPF spokesman in Brussels denied the rebels had ransacked the research station saying they had "no reason" to do so, the report said. He also rejected charges that the rebels had killed gorillas. "We have never done this. It was the Rwandan Army that did," he was quoted as saying.

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