

Concerns rise for safety of US citizens in Rwanda

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WASHINGTON, April 8 (AFP) - The United States is closing its embassy in Rwanda and is planning to evacuate the 250 American citizens in the chaotic African country, US officials said Friday.

Plans were being drawn up to evacuate all but a few American diplomats as fighting erupted near the residence of the US ambassador in the Rwandan capital Kigali, said Prudence Bushnell, acting secretary of state for African affairs.

President Bill Clinton said he was concerned, said White House spokeswoman Dee Dee Myers.

However, "Americans are not being targeted," Bushnell said.

The US ambassador's telephone line was not functioning, but he was in touch with other American diplomats by radio, Bushnell said.

Some 200 people had taken refuge in the residence compound, which was guarded by five UN peacekeep-

ers.

US ambassador David Rawson had been assured by the Rwandan defense minister that everything possible would be done to protect the residence, Bushnell said.

The State Department said it was maintaining telephone links with the US embassy.

The airport in Kigali was closed, complicating any evacuation plan. However, the airport in Bujumbura, the capital of neighbouring Burundi remained open, US officials said.

Nearly all of the 400 American citizens in Burundi are being urged to leave, the officials said.

Rwanda was on the verge of civil war Friday as battles with heavy weapons raged in Kigali. The violence followed the deaths Thursday of the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi in a plane crash.

A mob of Rwandans had gone into a Seventh Day Adventist school

where 21 of the teachers are Americans. School leaders were negotiating with the crowd, Bushnell said.

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

Ten Belgian UN soldiers were killed

Thursday.

One official 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.

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