

U.S. evacuates most govt personnel from South Sudan as violence escalates

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USPA News - The U.S. government on Friday ordered the majority of its remaining personnel in South Sudan to leave the country, suspending consular services at its embassy in the capital and urging American citizens to flee the African country amid escalating violence. An emergency message to U.S. citizens said the U.S. State Department had ordered the departure of most remaining U.S. government personnel from South Sudan due to the deteriorating security situation.

"The U.S. Embassy is therefore no longer able to provide any consular services to U.S. citizens in the Republic of South Sudan," the message said. U.S. State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said the evacuation was ordered out of "an abundance of caution" to ensure the safety and security of diplomatic personnel. "The U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya will provide consular services for U.S. citizens in South Sudan until further notice," she said. "We continue to strongly recommend that U.S. citizens in South Sudan depart immediately." An earlier emergency message urged American citizens to take a U.S. government-chartered flight that departed Juba International Airport on Friday morning. "U.S. citizens who are not able to take advantage of the evacuation flight should review their personal security situation and strongly consider taking advantage of any existing commercial flights," it said. But although the embassy's emergency messages advised that the U.S. Embassy in Juba would no longer be able to provide consular services, U.S. Ambassador Susan Page indicated that some government personnel remains to assist American citizens. "We are not suspending operations, we are just minimizing our presence," she said from Juba, where she is in contact with South Sudanese officials. The evacuation of U.S. personnel comes at a time when government and rebel negotiators have been speaking to international mediators in a bid to end the violent crisis, but no face-to-face meetings have taken place so far and there have been no signs that fighting is likely to end soon. The current crisis began on the evening of December 15 when gunfire erupted at the end of a meeting of the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) party, followed by an attack on the army headquarters near Juba University. Heavy gunfire and artillery fire in Juba and its suburbs continued the next day, prompting hundreds of terrified civilians to seek shelter at United Nations (UN) compounds. President Salva Kiir, dressed in military uniform and accompanied by senior officials, addressed the nation on December 16 and attributed the violence to a "failed coup attempt" by soldiers loyal to former Vice President Riek Machar Teny. Machar, along with the country's entire cabinet, was sacked in July in Kiir's apparent struggle to maintain control of the SPLM, but the exact extent of his role in the conflict remains disputed. Fighting intensified on December 17 and spread to other parts of the country that is prone to ethnic instability, with Kiir being from the Dinka ethnic group and Machar being a Lou Nuer. It is believed that more than 1,000 people have been killed since the outbreak of violence last month, but some UN officials have indicated that the figure is likely higher. South Sudan became the world's newest country when it broke away from Sudan on July 9, 2011, as a culmination of a six-year peace process which began in January 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM).

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