

Beat: Miscellaneous

U.S. evacuates staff from Libya after clashes near embassy

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USPA News - American government personnel was evacuated from Libya on Saturday after violent clashes between Libyan militias erupted near the U.S. Embassy compound in the capital Tripoli, U.S. officials said. It comes a day after Turkey also evacuated its diplomatic staff.

The operation to evacuate about 70 embassy staffers and Marine security guards took place early on Saturday and lasted approximately five hours. "This relocation was done over land, with our personnel arriving in Tunisia this morning, and traveling onward from there," said Marie Harf, a spokeswoman for the U.S. State Department. Pentagon Press Secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby said the evacuation took place under heavy military escort, but it concluded without incident. "The embassy staff was driven in vehicles to Tunisia. During movement, F-16's, ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) assets and an Airborne Response Force with MV-22 Ospreys provided security," he said. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said the area around the American embassy compound in Tripoli had been the scene of heavy fighting in recent days, although the attacks were not directed at Americans. "Nevertheless it presents a very real risk to our personnel. So we are suspending our current diplomatic activities at the embassy - [but] not closing the embassy," he said. Harf said the United States would explore options for a permanent return to Tripoli as soon as the security situation on the ground improves. "Securing our facilities and ensuring the safety of our personnel are top Department priorities, and we did not make this decision lightly," she said. "In the interim, staff will operate from Washington and other posts in the region." Benghazi has also experienced violence in recent weeks, but the American consulate there was closed after the September 11, 2012, attack that claimed the lives of U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. Saturday's evacuation of American government personnel came just a day after Turkey also evacuated its staff from the Turkish Embassy in Tripoli. "The core personnel of our Embassy will continue to work in the Turkish Embassy in Tunis for a while until conditions improve in Tripoli," Turkey's foreign affairs ministry said on Friday. The recent clashes in Tripoli are the worst in the Libyan capital since 2011 when months of civil war led to the toppling of the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. Much of the violence has been in the capital's south, where diplomatic compounds are located, but militants have also fought for control of Tripoli International Airport. Dozens of people have been killed.

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