

Panicking Rwandan refugees flood into Zaire
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LA GRANDE BARRIERE, Rwanda-Zaire border, July 14 (AFP) - Tens of thousands of Rwandan refugees, fleeing the advancing Rwandan Patriotic Front, surged into the Zairean border town of Goma on Thursday, catching humanitarian aid groups unprepared for their arrival.

From dawn Thursday, the border crossings out of Rwanda were awash with crowds of miserable, nervous refugees, pushing their children ahead of them, following what was for many an already weeks-long flight across the war-scarred country.

The Tutsi-led RPF has pushed decisively into the western Rwandan holdout of the ousted government forces, sending waves of refugees flooding into Zaire.

Ruhengeri, the northwestern town fell overnight into RPF hands, the minister for planning in the former Hutu-dominated government, Augustin Ngirabatware said at La Grande Barriere, the main crossing point between Gisenyi in Rwanda and Goma.

The first shooting started at 5:00 a.m. "Our soldiers fired automatic weapons fire to test the enemy presence and the RPF responded immediately from the top of the hill," Ngirabatware said.

By Thursday morning, the RPF had got to within about 25 kilometres (15 miles) of Gisenyi, the last holdout of the former government, the minister said.

Panicking refugees fled toward the border where Zairean policemen fired into the air in a vain attempt to halt the crowds.

Thursday morning it was impossible to push a way through the tightpacked crowd back into Rwanda. "I came to make sure people could get through," Ngirabatware said. He was accompanied by the social affairs minister in the former government, Jean de Die Habineza.

According to them, the crowd extended back to Nyundo, 12 kilometres (seven miles) into Rwanda. By mid-afternoon the river of bodies was still as strong.

After initially trying to halt the flow, the Zairean authorities gave up and let everyone through, searching them and confiscating machetes and grenades.

At Birere, a nearby smaller border crossing, the search for arms and identity checks rapidly turned into an excuse to plunder the refugees' belongings, brought with them at such great effort.

The scene repeats itself in the town where the refugees complain they have been stopped and robbed by soldiers, customs guards, civil guards and also the civilian population of the lakeside town.

The day before, it was Rwandan government army soldiers that were robbing the refugees of their last possessions, several said.

At the southern entry into Goma, sticks, machetes and grenades are piled up by the side of the road. There are perhaps 5,000 people squatting by the roadside or cutting down branches to light fires.

Inside the town, thousands more wander aimlessly, looking lost, attempting to find a space to pitch themselves for the night close to the airport base of the French military intervention.

Caught short by the waves of refugees, staff of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees attempt to lead people towards three sites which they hope can cope with 50,000 people.

The British humanitarian group Oxfam says 40,000 others are crammed into the Unity Stadium, along with a few of their cattle and other belongings they brought with them.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is worried by the number of people and the lack of water, sites, and food for them. As of Thursday, it has only 1,000 tonnes of food in stock, a spokeswoman says.

"It's clearly not enough," said ICRC spokeswoman Johanna Grombach, who expects half-a-million refugees in the next few days.

"It's probably one of the largest movements of refugees that we have had to deal with in years," she said.

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