

African summit focuses on Rwandas refugees

Annie Thomas

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NAIROBI, Jan 7 (AFP) - Leaders from seven central and east African nations gathered here for a one-day summit Saturday to discuss how to persuade hundreds of thousands of Rwandan refugees to return home.

"The question that should be uppermost in our minds is how to prevent such a catastrophe as was witnessed last year from repeating itself," Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi said in his welcoming address as leaders and their foreign ministers gathered at the Presidential Palace.

But the glaring absence of Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko, the only head of state to stay away from Nairobi, will undoubtedly detract from the summit, according to Kenyan press reports. Mobutu is represented by his Prime Minister Kengo Wa Dondo.

One delegate at a summit preparatory-meeting of foreign ministers and officials in Nairobi Friday said the summit would be a failure without him.

"The questions that will be asked

need Mobutu's personal response," he told The Nation newspaper.

Rwandan president Pasteur Bizimungu, Sylvestre Ntibantunganya of Burundi, Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, Ali Hassan Mwinyi of Tanzania and Frederick Chiluba of Zambia all joined their host arap Moi for the summit in his presidential palace.

The UN Secretary General's special representative in Kigali, Shahar-yar Khan, was an observer at the summit.

Arap Moi said some five million Rwandan refugees were affected, two million of whom are based in neighbouring countries.

"It is only through a genuine process of national reconciliation that a cycle of violence in our sister state can be avoided," he warned.

Rwanda's Rehabilitation and Reintegration Minister Jacques Bihozagara told journalists that his country expected the summit to provide "concrete measures" to tackle the problem.

He said Rwanda wanted transit zones to be set up for returning refugees, the countrywide deployment of human rights observers, and extra UN soldiers – 5,500 – to police the operation.

He said UN troops were needed in particular to separate the former regime's soldiers and militia from refugees in giant camps in Zaire and Tanzania where they continued a campaign of intimidation.

Bihozagara said the Kigali government would not hold talks with the leaders of the former interim government, now based in Zaire as

a government-in-exile, as it would mean talking to the "authors of genocide".

Neighbouring Burundi, which itself teeters on the brink of a blood-bath comparable to Rwanda's because of its acute tribal problems, has a special interest on the Nairobi outcome.

There are some 300,000 Burundian refugees, mostly in Zaire, while several hundred thousand others are displaced within their own country.

The summit was due to end Saturday evening.

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