

Rwandan apocalypse

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Clinton announces 'massive and immediate' aid increase. Refugee a minute said to be dying. Buzz up! Digg it

Chris McGreal in Goma, Ian Katz in Washington and Ian Black

Shocked by what President Bill Clinton termed possibly the world's 'worst humanitarian crisis in a generation', the United States plunged into the Rwandan tragedy yesterday, launching an emergency, round-the-clock military airlift to deliver international relief supplies to refugees dying by the thousands on the border with Zaire.

Mr Clinton announced his plans for a 'massive and immediate' increase in aid as the United Nations secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, called for over Dollars 400 million to deal with the disaster, which relief agencies say is worsening swiftly as governments respond sluggishly.

'Rwanda is today a human tragedy which concerns all of us,' Mr Boutros-Ghali said. 'This disaster, which is unfolding before our eyes, is our collective responsibility, the responsibility of the international community as a whole.'

President Clinton, saying that one refugee was dying every minute, said the US would support an immediate deployment of UN peacekeepers in Rwanda to help persuade the displaced

people that it was safe to go home. This suggestion was rapidly emerging as the only long-term strategy for dealing with the crisis.

'We are making clear to the new leaders of Rwanda that international acceptance, including American recognition, depends upon the establishment of a broad-based government, the rule of law and efforts at national reconciliation,' he said, referring to the new Rwanda Patriotic Front government.

No US military personnel are to be deployed in Rwanda itself, but an advance party of four American officers arrived in Goma airport yesterday.

At the same time an advance UN team entered Gisenyi, across the border from Goma, for talks with the RPF on permitting foreign troops to help guarantee the refugees' security.

'Right away we are asking people to go back,' said UN High Commissioner for Refugees spokesman Panos Moutzis. 'We feel it is safe for them to go back now. Here, we're fighting cholera . . . and it's an absolute nightmare.'

The new RPF-dominated government in Kigali also appealed to refugees to return to their homes, pledging that there would be no reprisals against those not implicated in the ethnic massacres in which

an estimated 500,000 people died. The prime minister, Faustin Twagiramungu, said aid agencies should offer food on Rwandan soil as an incentive to return.

Cholera has spread to most of the main refugee camps and now to the Zairean population too, threatening a security crisis after Zairean soldiers attacked refugees - killing at least three - in an effort to drive them away from the overcrowded border town.

Thousands more of the one million refugees fell victim to cholera as well as to dysentery, malaria, exhaustion, hunger and dehydration. French forces said they buried 1,000 corpses in a single mass grave outside Goma yesterday.

Bernadette Feeney, from London, an aid worker with Concern, helped sort out the dead from those who still had a chance. 'There were so many bodies this morning we were delayed in dealing with the living by carrying out the dead. Now we're trying to get some order. There's nothing more we can do at the moment.'

But with the bulk of the refugees still moving north to reach the camps, it remains impossible to say how many people are dying and of what. Thousands more bodies lined the roadsides at dawn yesterday awaiting collection by lorries for delivery to mass graves. By the time the lorries returned hundreds more corpses had taken their place.

Mr Clinton said he was ordering the establishment of an 'airlift hub' in Uganda to ship in relief supplies the expansion of existing airlift operations and the setting up of a safe water supply.

Britain welcomed the US initiative but said it has no plans to send any

military personnel. Another pounds 5 million in state aid is to be used to finance non-governmental agencies in addition to the pounds 40 million already donated bilaterally and through the European Union.

'We will continue to do what we do best - supporting aid organisations who have material here but need funding to get out there,' said a spokesman for the Overseas Development Administration.

More than five million Rwandans out of a population of eight million have been displaced.

Yesterday's responses in Washington and New York followed scathing criticism by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees of slow government responses to urgent calls for help.

In an impassioned appeal, the agency's spokeswoman, Sylvana Foa, said every country, even the poorest, should contribute to the relief operation for a disaster she said was 'worse than anything happening anywhere'.

Aid agencies are still failing to provide even minimum sustenance and health care. Food is not reaching the overwhelming majority of refugees, especially those still walking, exposing themselves to even greater risk of disease and death.

Medecins sans Frontieres, which has taken the lead role in the cholera epidemic, has only 10 doctors and eight nurses to handle the crisis. Another 30 doctors are due today, but only enough medicines to treat properly 500 people remain.

Brian Atwood, the US aid chief who visited Goma earlier this week, said yesterday 'we have never seen anything like it.'

He said 24 military personnel would

arrive in the Zairean town today to start work on the airport. Radar and landing lights would be operational within three or four days and similar improvements would be made to the airport at Bukavu. Loading equipment and trucks will be deployed at both sites.

Purification systems will be installed to produce drinking water from

Lake Kivu 'within a matter of days'. Radio jamming equipment will also be used to block broadcasts by a Rwandan radio station which has been encouraging people to leave the country.

Mr Atwood said C-130 aircraft will begin dropping rations daily from tomorrow and other aircraft would transport 1,480 tons of food to the area over the next few days.