

Survival Amid Smoke Fires In a Camp of Thousands

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RUSUMO, TANZANIA — THOUSANDS of machetes and crude garden hoes lie piled at the guard post on the border with Tanzania, testament to the severity of the ethnic bloodletting that forced 250,000 refugees to flee Rwanda in just one 25-hour period.

The tools were used to protect as well as kill during Rwanda's slaughter, which has left up to 200,000 dead in a month, according to United Nation officials.

The cross-border exodus was the largest and fastest the UN has ever recorded in Africa : Every hour 10,000 refugees squeezed across the two-lane bridge here. The refugees, 95 percent of whom are from the majority Hutu ethnic group, took advantage of a brief gap in fighting on April 29, to cross. The border is now controlled by the Tutsi-dominated rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), and UN officials believe that another 200,000 people may be "trapped" behind the border.

And on this side of the river, international relief organizations face a daunting task in developing sanitation facilities, a clean water supply, and feeding stations.

Nicholas Dettorrente, an officer of the French charity Medicin sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) in

charge of preliminary water needs, said that the camp needs 1.5 million liters (450,000 gallons) of water per day for 150,000 people. A nearby lake has already been fouled. Crowds dip their muddy jerrycans and blackened pots into the water.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has already prepared 125,000 jerrycans, 22,000 rolls of plastic sheeting, 50,000 kitchen sets, and 450,000 blankets, which are being airlifted into Mwanza, Tanzania, and driven by convoy to the camp.

And the World Food Programme has 58,000 tons of food already earmarked for all Rwanda's refugees and displaced, enough food for 1.2 million people for two months.

A troubled past

Rwanda is the second most-densely populated country in the world, after Bangladesh.

Human rights groups, including Amnesty International, and relief workers here say extremist Hutu Army officers and government officials are the organizational forces behind the ethnic fighting, which erupted April 6 when an airplane carrying Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana and his

Burundian counterpart was shot down over the Rwandan capital of Kigali.

Most of the victims had been Tutsi or Hutu supporters of the Hutu president's moderate government. But Rwanda's collapse into ethnic and political fighting is causing fear far beyond its borders : Burundi, to the south and with the same ethnic template as Rwanda, has experienced similar spates of bloodshed for three decades ; neighboring Zaire and Kenya, to the west and east, both have festering ethnic tension.

The RPF denies that they have closed the border, but a rebel spokesman in Brussels told the BBC in an interview that anyone trying to leave would be "screened" at the border to see if they were among those "massacring the population."

The Rwandan refugees formed a 10-mile-long column - pushing, pulling, and carrying all their belongings - that stretched from the bridge to a new camp laid out by Tanzanian authorities. Exhausted babies sobbed dirt-stained tears and wizened elderly - wearing only rags - hobbled along, shoeless.

The crowds began to shift east, expanding the camp to a smoke-covered square of squalor 2 1/2 by 3 miles, and moving like worker ants through heavy mist and smoke with thick bundles of mattresses and firewood balanced on their heads.

Maureen Connolly, the emergency officer for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees who is coordinating the entire relief effort, said that despite their chaotic exit, the refugees were orderly. "It's unbelievable when you consider what has been happening to drive these people out and the gentleness that we've seen with this popula-

tion so far."

Still, there is some concern even on this side of the bridge. Xavier Nzamwita, a Tutsi student from the northern village of Rahunda, watched Hutu militiamen kill his mother, father, two sisters, and five brothers with machetes. In two days, he said, 1,000 Tutsis were killed in Rahunda.

"I hid in a pit for two days, then walked at night for two weeks to get here, hiding during the daylight," he says in hushed tones." He threw away his Tutsi identification card and made friends with a Hutu family that saved him. Watching the crowds of muddy refugees, he summed up the situation he shares with many refugees here : "Now I think that nobody can kill me, but also that nobody can support me."

Other refugees were caught in the fighting between the Army and the rebels, whose forces have moved south on the capital and taken control of the north and east of the country. Depending on their ethnicity, many refugees see members of the opposite group as killers.

"The RPF is telling us that the Rwandans [Hutus] have to be pushed abroad for 30 years," says Paul Mushi-mirwa, a Hutu farmer, "the same way that they stayed in exile for 30 years."

Many of the 20,000 RPF fighters are Tutsis who grew up in exile after their families fled uprisings by Hutus who overthrew the Tutsi monarchy in 1959. Since Rwanda gained its independence from Belgium in 1961, the two groups have fought for control.

Kayisave Kosima, a Hutu teacher, pulls out a pocket calendar on which he has circled April 14, the day he fled his home, and the day he was forced to leave his ailing mother behind. "We are so afraid to go back to Rwanda," he

says. "We are afraid the RPF has killed so many of our families. We prefer to stay here."

The stampede

Though the camp is now established, refugees sometimes fight over porridge and meat. There remains a persistent danger that the conflict could spill across the border and into the camp.

Violence - and a frightening mob mentality - is not far from the surface. One night last week, thunder erupted out of the darkness of the camp, shaking the earth at night with the sound of 250,000 refugees running and screaming. A frenzied "stampede" rumbled down the length of the camp and back. Screaming refugees built their smoldering cooking fires higher in the dark-

ness.

The Tanzanian Red Cross workers panicked in their adjacent camp. The clamor eventually died down enough for the Tanzanian Red Cross to mount a brave journey with a megaphone in a truck up and down the length of the camp to quiet the refugees. The cause of fear : A lion had been seen, and the refugees - all 250,000 of them - had pounded on their plastic jerrycans.

The incident inexplicably recurred twice more in the night, underlining the fragile vulnerability of peace and the risk taken by relief workers who stay here.

"These people are so frightened," said Hamida, the Tanzanian woman in charge of the Red Cross camp who laughed with relief after the first outburst. "They are terrorized and don't want any violence here."