

U.N. says it steps up food deliveries to Rwanda

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NAIROBI, April 23 (Reuter) - The U.N. food agency WFP said it had re-started relief work in southern Rwanda on Saturday to curb the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation there.

The U.N. World Food Programme (WFP) said it had also stepped up deliveries of relief food to new Rwandan refugees in the neighbouring countries of Zaire, Burundi, Tanzania and Uganda.

A WFP statement in Nairobi said following an agreement on joint cross-border operation between the WFP and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), WFP food delivered to the Rwanda-Burundi border would be handed over to the ICRC for distribution to the displaced in southern Rwanda.

It said the first truck of relief food for southern Rwanda reached the Rwanda-Burundi border on Friday for an estimated 150,000 people in the Butare and Gutamare areas.

“WFP is setting up a transport fleet of 22 long-haul trucks in Burundi for the cross-border operation to ensure additional transport capacity of 660 tonnes. The trucks will primarily be used to deliver food across the border into Rwanda and Zaire.”

It added that the WFP and other U.N. agencies, under the coordination of the department of human affairs, had sent an assessment team to the embattled capital Kigali to examine the possibility of starting delivery and distribution of relief food to thousands of suffering people trapped in Kigali.

The high-powered U.N. assessment mission in the tiny nation of eight million people, which arrived on Saturday, is led by Undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs Peter Hansen.

The WFP said it had mobilised 58,000 tonnes of food – enough to meet the demands of 1.2 million Rwandan and Burundian refugees in the region for two months.

“There are widespread shortages of food, drinkable water and medicines in much of the country. The situation is especially critical in Kigali, the epicentre of the current fighting where bodies are still lying in the streets, creating danger of epidemics,” the WFP said.

The latest Rwanda fighting was triggered by the death on April 6 of president Juvenal Habyarimana in rocket attack on his plane.

Rwandan refugees who have fled and sought refuge in Burundi had reached 15,000, more than double in just two days. The WFP said violence at one border

point had killed scores of people and forced others across the frontier.

Since the fighting erupted in Rwanda, some 50,000 Burundians who had sought refuge in southern Rwanda had since returned to their country and were housed in transit camps, the WFP said.

In Zaire, the WFP said there were 45,000 new refugees in the last month, in addition to 50,000 Burundians who fled to the area in October 1993, after the killing by renegade paratroops of Burundian President Melchior Ndadaye.

Fresh Rwandan refugees in Tanzania were estimated by the WFP at 20,000, bringing the total figure to about 80,000. The WFP added that some 5,000 new Rwandan refugees had entered Uganda.

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