

A massacre a week

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NGOZI, Burundi, Dec 10 (AFP) - In northern Burundi, people have got used to a massacre a week, on average.

Twenty, 30, 50 dead at a time, killed by gunshot, hacked with pangas (machetes), blown to bits by a grenade. The killers are unknown.

They might be armed gangs from the Hutu majority, or from the Tutsi minority which dominates the Burundi army, they could be soldiers from Burundi or from neighbouring Rwanda, or yet again just "simple" residents, be they locals, refugees or displaced persons.

There are more than 200,000 refugees from Rwanda alongside tens of thousands of Burundians, who are "displaced" in camps or "dispersed" in villages and among the hills and swamps.

Throughout the tiny eastern African state, the displaced and the dispersed number more than 500,000.

The use of such distinctions by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees,

the World Food Programme, and the private relief agencies, highlights the complexity of the problems.

The Rwandan refugees are nearly all Hutu, who fled their country when the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front stormed the capital Kigali in July to take power.

Among the refugees are Hutus who took part in in the systematic massacre of up to one million Tutsis and opposition Hutus after Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana, along with Burundi's President Cyprien Ntaryamira, were killed in a suspected rocket attack on their plane at Kigali.

Refugees are still streaming in, the UNHCR said this week, reporting an inflow of up to 10,000 in recent weeks.

Among them was Valerie, a tired little woman, a widow with five children. She was putting up her hut at Ruvumu camp near here, covered with plastic sheeting to keep out the torrential rain.

She had been staying in a displaced persons camp near Gikongoro in south-west Rwanda, but Patriotic Front troops have been emptying the camps, setting off a fresh exodus to Burundi and Zaire.

Valerie and dozens of others were aligning their cabins, which have the "address" written in big letters on the sheeting by zone, district, cell and hut : Z8.Q82-C1-B10

Their Burundi neighbours are Tutsis who quit their homes as long ago as October last year to gather in camps under the protection of the army.

They were fleeing the vengeance of Hutus who went on the warpath when President Melchior Ndadaye was killed during a failed military coup.

They are constantly on the alert for armed gangs set up by former government minister Leonard Nyangoma, a Hutu extremist whose political movement Forces for the Defence of Democracy (FDD) operates an armed wing to attack soldiers.

The Tutsis have formed a counterforce of militiamen who attack Hutu politicians or Hutus in general, be they villagers or dispersed persons.

There are troops and roadblocks

everywhere in the north, where white foreigners are sometimes suspected of being spies for Nyangoma.

The Hutu who have fled home are spread out in the countryside because they are too afraid of the army to join the camps for displaced persons.

Many of them had fled to Rwanda after the failed coup, but the massacres there this year drove them back over the border again.

All of the various "categories" need humanitarian aid. "We try to keep politics out of things as much as possible," said Thomas Gonnet.

He is mission chief in Ngozi for International Action Against Hunger (AICF). "We move about a lot, to try to limit damage just by being there," he added.

Compared with the refugee camps in Zaire, there are no really acute problems here, since the militia are fewer in number and less well drilled. But the enforced cheek by jowl existence of Hutu and Tutsi and the abundance of weaponry make the region explosive.

"There are at least 30 deaths a week," said Stephane, a logistics worker with AICF.

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